

AUGUST 28, 2006

# The American Conservative

What is

LEFT?

NATIONAL  
REVIEW

New American

Dissent

THE AMERICAN

SPECTATOR

the weekly

Standard

Commentary

THE AMERICAN  
PROSPECT

THE  
NEW REPUBLIC

What is

RIGHT?

Chronicles  
A MAGAZINE OF AMERICAN CULTURE

HARP

reason

Free Minds and Free Markets

The Nation

Does it Matter?

## The American Conservative

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### FREE TO SAY NO

Kudos to *The American Conservative* for its thoughtful articles about immigration. Being of a libertarian sensibility, I feel obliged to call on fellow libertarians to recognize a contradiction in today's libertarian thinking: *laissez-faire* immigration and limited government. The two cannot coexist.

Limited government can only come about through cultural consensus. That consensus holds, roughly speaking, that the benefit of limited government to all trumps the parochial interests of any one group. This consensus has only been arrived at over the last 300 years in places that were largely homogeneous in character (see early America, 19th-century Great Britain, and modern Hong Kong). High immigration voids the consensus. The temptation for myriad ethnic groups to grab the government apparatus and turn on enemies real and imagined is simply too great.

It's time for libertarians with their priorities in the right place to join conservatives in calling for a dead-stop halt to immigration. Until assimilation occurs and newer citizens unite with the American nation, limited government doesn't stand a chance.

JAMES MOSHER

*Loch Raven, Md.*

### MIXED MOTIVES

Surely Kevin Phillips is correct that securing Iraq's oil fields was a major cause for the Iraq invasion (July 17). But protecting Israel was also a pivotal reason. According to the *Asia Times*, six months before the start of the Iraq War a member of a top-level White House intelligence group suggested that a prime motive for an invasion would be to eliminate a threat to Israel because Iraq did not really pose a threat to the United States. Philip Zelickow, a member of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, which reports directly to the president, admitted this to a crowd at

the University of Virginia, speaking on a panel of foreign-policy experts.

Zelickow's statement is one of the first to surface from a source closely linked to the Bush administration admitting that the war was motivated at least in part by Washington's desire to defend Israel.

FRANK MESSMANN

*Falmouth, Mass.*

### DEFENDER OF THE FAITH

I enjoyed the article "Reconciling Christendom" by Marcia Christoff Kurapovna (July 17). However, she refers to the Fourth Crusade as the "Rome versus Constantinople Crusade." This leaves the impression that the Vatican directed the peculiarly savage sacking of Constantinople by the Crusaders. Actually, the Vatican under Pope Innocent III did not want the Fourth Crusade to go to Constantinople at all, and by the time the Crusaders reached Constantinople, the pope had already excommunicated more than half of the men of the Fourth Crusade for having previously brutally sacked the Christian city of Zara (in fact, the entire Crusade was excommunicated for this crime, but the Franks asked for and received pardon, while the Venetians remained excommunicated). When the pope got news of the viciousness of the Crusaders, "he was filled with shame," according to Thomas F. Madden in *A Concise History of the Crusades*.

The soldiers of the Fourth Crusade, a majority of whom were Roman Catholic excommunicants, should not be seen as representatives of the Church of Rome.

JOE PORRECA

*West Seneca, N.Y.*

*The American Conservative* welcomes letters to the editor. Submit by e-mail to [letters@amconmag.com](mailto:letters@amconmag.com), or by mail to 1300 Wilson Blvd., Suite 120, Arlington, VA 22209. Please include your name, address, and phone number. We reserve the right to edit all correspondence for space and clarity.

## What is Left? What is Right? *Does it Matter?*

Since its inception, *The American Conservative* has been dealing with questions of what Right and Left mean in the modern context and to what extent the terms even apply anymore. *Commentary* memorably took up similar issues in a 1976 symposium, and, 30 years later, in a time of renewed ideological flux, we think a reconsideration is in order.

In the interest of hosting a lively discussion, we chose contributors from across the political spectrum and asked for their thoughts on the following questions:

- 1. Are the designations “liberal” and “conservative” still useful? Why or why not?**
- 2. Does a binary Left/Right political spectrum describe the full range of ideological options? Is it still applicable?**

Not all of these authors share *TAC*'s editorial orientation, but we believe there is wisdom in the council of many, and each was chosen as representative of a particular perspective. We leave our readers to decide which insights most accord with their own.

Andrew J. Bacevich  
Jeremy Beer  
Austin Bramwell  
Patrick J. Buchanan  
John Derbyshire  
Ross Douthat  
Rod Dreher  
Mary Eberstadt  
Nick Gillespie  
Paul Gottfried

Jeffrey Hart  
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Phyllis Schlafly  
Fred Siegel  
Taki Theodoracopulos  
Philip Weiss  
Chilton Williamson Jr.  
Clyde N. Wilson  
John Zmirak

**Andrew J. Bacevich** In a domestic political context, the terms “liberal” and “conservative” still retain considerable value. To imagine, however, that the actually existing Democratic Party is genuinely committed to liberal principles or to fancy that the Republican Party qualifies as authentically conservative is to err profoundly. However much Democratic and Republican partisans may pretend to differ, they actually subscribe to a common agenda. Ranking at the very top of that agenda is the imperative of currying favor with the moneyed interests that enable the two parties to sustain their monopoly on power. Party leaders may pontificate about social justice or liberty, but the name of the game is boodle—federal largesse distributed to secure the allegiance of supporters, “contributions” harvested from those same supporters to buy the next election, all continuing in a cycle without end.

In the political mainstream, expediency rules and principles are expendable—as baby-boomer Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have each amply demonstrated. In a system as corrupt as ours has become, principles survive chiefly among those who occupy the political fringe—populists, pinks, aging New Leftists, agrarians, radical environmentalists, Catholic Workers, libertarians, and paleocons. When it comes to illuminating the hypocrisies and contradictions that afflict the American way of life, each of these groups has something to offer—which is why the thinking conservative will find more of value these days in *The New York Review of Books* than in *National Review* and why true-blue progressives are better off subscribing to *The American Conservative* than to *The New Republic*.

**“The story of the American Century, endlessly reiterated by the political elite, has become our substitute for history.”**

In a foreign-policy context, “liberal” and “conservative” don’t have any real meaning and never have. When it comes to statecraft, the operative dichotomy does not pit Left against Right, realists against idealists, or (as President Bush has fraudulently argued) isolationists against those committed to engagement and leadership. The real divide today occurs between those who buy into the myths of the American Century and those who see those myths for what they are: once useful contrivances that have become a source of self-delusion endangering the national interest.

The American Century is a morality tale. It instructs and inspires but also warns. It tells of how Americans, having lost their innocence on Dec. 7, 1941, rose up in righteous anger to smite a succession of evildoers. The American Cen-

tury began when the nation finally embraced its providentially assigned mission to spread liberty around the world. Present-day adherents to this school—self-described liberals like Peter Beinart no less than self-described conservatives like William Kristol—do not doubt that the events of Sept. 11, 2001 simply inaugurated the next phase of this grand undertaking. Absent a failure of nerve on the part of the American people—the bogeyman of isolationism always lurks nearby—final victory in the global war on terror is certain to be ours, thereby securing the utopia of permanent U.S. global dominion. The story of the American Century, endlessly reiterated by members of the political elite, has become our substitute for history.

In the opposing camp are those who credit America’s rise to power to something other than righteousness and a dedication to liberty for all. It was not righteousness that bought Louisiana, took California, annexed Hawaii, seized the Philippines, and converted the Caribbean into an American lake. Nor did past administrations collaborate with Stalin, court the Saudi royals, depose Mossadegh, befriend Somoza, arrange the overthrow of Diem, court Mao, and tilt in favor of Saddam against the ayatollahs because of our devotion to democracy and human rights.

Judge actions such as these as you will: nefarious, reckless, shortsighted, necessary, or merely amoral. What cannot be denied is that they describe a pattern of behavior that does not differ in substance from that of most other great powers in history. Like others, the United States acts in pursuit of its perceived self-interest. Professions of concern for freedom, democracy, and human rights serve as little more than window-dressing.

The insiders who dominate U.S. foreign policy have a vested interest in sustaining the twaddle about an American Century. After all, it cements their hold on power. The American Century emphasizes secrecy and deference to those who are presumably “in the know.” It shields members of this self-perpetuating elite from accountability. It provides a handy cloak for megalomania and a ready excuse for error. It keeps debate over foreign policy and its implications narrow and insipid—as the Democratic critique of the Iraq War has demonstrated. It excludes the great unwashed.

American exceptionalism is a delusion. The beginning of wisdom in foreign policy lies in seeing ourselves as we really are and in acknowledging our responsibility for the mess in which we find ourselves, in Iraq and elsewhere. When it comes to extricating ourselves from that mess, the first order of business is to clean up our own act. Principled liberals and authentic conservatives will disagree on how best to do so, but that surely is a debate worth having. ■

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## Jeremy Beer

One of the most striking features of cultural discourse today is the inversion of terminology among self-identified “liberals” and “conservatives.” It is not just that the vocabulary of our leading “conservatives” is peppered with the grand abstractions (“freedom,” “democracy,” “progress,” “evil”) always preferred by power-obsessed revolutionaries and ideological zealots. That has been widely noted for some time now. Rather, it is that the terminology historically associated with the conservative impulse has not simply been forgotten or ignored but has been taken up by others—including those who consider themselves progressives or liberals. “Preserve,” “save,” “conserve,” “sustain,” “protect,” “heritage,” “tradition,” “community,” “place,” “decentralized,” “permanence,” “beauty,” “humane”—these former keywords of conservatism have largely migrated to other political quarters.

One comes across this every day, particularly at the local level. In my own neck of the woods here in southeastern Pennsylvania, there are numerous organizations—civil associations, Burke’s little platoons—that appeal to these concepts in explaining their work. And they are not self-consciously conservative. The best example comes from the Brandywine Conservancy, which buys up land and development rights and owns a hugely popular art museum. The conservancy is largely funded and run by political liberals. Yet it seeks to “preserve the natural and cultural resources of the area and has been instrumental in permanently protecting” thousands of acres. The conservancy specializes in “conservation easements,” “historic preservation,” and “water protection efforts.” The organization is also, as one might expect, a leader in the fight against sprawl in this densely populated area. In that struggle it has allied itself with the New Urbanist idea of “traditional neighborhood development.” “Save Your Heritage!” urges the flyer that arrived in the mail the other day, which promotes a lecture that will provide “tools for local historic preservation.”

One might also mention S.A.V.E., which has waged a years-long war to stop the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation from mindlessly expanding a two-lane highway that rolls through Amish farm country and appeals to the concepts of “livable communities,” “permanently preserved open space,” and a “sustainable future” in doing so. Clearly, these are not the nouns and adjectives of philosophical liberalism. Yet the point is not that these organizations or others with similar missions throughout the nation are flawless models, or even that they are pursuing ends as authentically conservative as they sound (though in fact they usually are); rather, it is that, increasingly, they couch their work in an appeal to traditionally conservative concepts.

The tragedy is that the conservative movement cannot take credit for this groundswell of conservative feeling—not here nor, I suspect, anywhere else. These small, local, civic

groups, all of them trying to protect goods necessary to human flourishing, do not appeal to the conservative tradition in making their cases, nor do they attract (for the most part) right-wingers to their causes. The more self-conscious today’s conservative man is of his conservatism, the more likely he is to be suspicious of such organizations. He has been taught to think in terms of ideological abstractions. Say the word “conservation” or, heaven help you, “sustainability,” and he merely flips to the flash card in his head marked “Environmentalism: Bad.” Appeal to tradition or inherited rights, and he reminds you that, In This Time of War, Sacrifices Must Be Made. And, besides being the price of capital-

**“The conservers, preservers, savers, and protectors—conservatism once stood for such folks, and such folks were at one time conservatives. But they make bad apparatchiks.”**

ist progress, he has been assured that studies actually show Wal-Mart is good for communities; meanwhile, his own town has lost, oh, half a dozen or more locally owned businesses since the Smiley Face moved in ten miles down the road, finishing the community-killing work started by the federal purse and the federal bulldozer. But what does personal observation count in the face of the great think tanks’ official authority?

The conservers, preservers, savers, and protectors—conservatism once stood for such folks, and such folks were at one time conservatives. But they make bad apparatchiks. They aren’t ideologically motivated and aren’t “thinking big.” They are simply concerned, if often locally prominent, citizens. They may also be sentimental saps, but that’s understandable. As normally functioning human beings, they have formed dear attachments to their social and physical worlds. They like their communities, want to see them thrive and prosper, want to see them made or kept beautiful, want to preserve (or reinvigorate) their sense of their places as unique, and prefer to interact daily with people they know and love—or even hate.

Here is where Russell Kirk was truly exemplary. He ought to be remembered not as “the principal architect of the post-war conservative movement,” as the quasi-official adulation has it, but because he went home. There he restored an old house, planted trees, and became a justice of the peace; took a wife (and kept her) and had four children; wrote ghost stories about census-takers and other bureaucrats getting it in the neck; took in boatpeople and bums; and denounced every war in which the U.S. became involved—especially the first Gulf War, which he detested. And he also denounced

abstractions because he knew they were drugs deployed to distract us from the infinitely more important work of the Brandywine Conservancies of the world.

If there is ever to be truth in our political labeling, we need conservatives who will go home, or at least make homes somewhere, conservatives who will abjure Washington and New York and pick up the struggle in their own burghs to help (re-)build real communities, work to conserve the land and its resources, and ally with their naturally like-minded brethren in order to revive—locally—the religious and historic traditions that might sustain us. In fact, those are the only conservatives we need. ■

**JEREMY BEER** is editor in chief of *ISI Books* and editor, with *Bruce Frohnen* and *Jeffrey O. Nelson*, of *American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia*.

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**Austin Bramwell** In America, it is necessary to distinguish between two senses of the word “conservative.” The first refers to that set of ideas that find their canonical expression in the revolutionary writings of Edmund Burke; the second, to that set of institutions which, after some hesitation in the 1950s (some preferred “individualist” or more recherché labels like “Old Whig”), claimed the term “conservative” for themselves. In distinguishing the two, I do not mean to be tendentious. If the conservative movement is not exactly “conservative,” that is the fault not of the movement but of conservatism. Burke’s writings, however prophetic, do not set forth a timeless approach to political problems. On the contrary, on most questions they offer no guidance whatsoever. One can construct a superficially “Burkean” argument for two sides of any controversy. Was Lincoln “conservative”? The New Deal? Anti-communism? Is gay marriage “conservative”? The Bush tax cuts? The Kyoto Protocol? Is the conservative movement “conservative”? The answer in each case is “yes and no,” or more accurately, “neither yes nor no.”

Of course, Burke does still have the power to scandalize. His interlocutors, believing in the justice of the Revolution, could not imagine that their schemes would come to grief. Burke, by contrast, asking what the actual consequences of their actions would be, exposed truths about the nature of the state that many would still prefer not to hear: that peace depends on unconscious obedience and acceptance of authority; that men can never have equal political power; that hierarchy is inevitable. (To this day, whenever the legitimacy of the state comes into doubt—as in Iraq or in the debate in America over the role of the courts—we ignore Burke at our peril.) Burke mastered, in short, what Max Weber called the “ethic of responsibility,”

namely, the demand that no matter how noble our aims, we always give an account of the foreseeable results of our actions.

This ethic does not flinch from the possibility that evil may come from good and good from evil. Its adherents accept, indeed often embrace, the cruelties of the world. It is precisely this embrace of cruelty—yes, cruelty!—that unites all those that we call “right-wing.” The free-marketeer with his warnings against perverse incentives, the Romantic reactionary with his fulminations against “modernity,” the moral traditionalist with his fear of unfettered appetite, the charismatic nationalist with his call for iron-fisted rule, the cold-blooded diplomat with his distrust of humanitarian motives: all reject the Left’s intuition that, with just a little more effort, the world can be cured of its ills. In facing the melancholy truths of our condition, the Right enjoys a freedom of thought that the Left cannot imagine and, perhaps, utterly dreads.

The conservative movement does remain at least recognizably right-wing. Its alliance with the Bush administration, however, has made it less so. “Compassionate conservatism”; “no child left behind”; “America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one”; “Freedom is on the march”; “When somebody hurts, government has got to move”: each slogan reveals a man determined to do what is right and to leave the rest to the Lord. Sadly, rather than reject this attitude, some in the conservative movement have adopted it as their own. In their minds, for example, the ideals that motivate Bush’s Iraq policy justify them absolutely.

More often, however, the conservative movement’s support for the Bush administration has had subtler effects. Embarrassed by the apparent failure of the Iraq venture, moderate Bush supporters acknowledge the difficulties but argue that the situation in Iraq is neither rosy nor grim and that, with this or that change in policy, it may even turn out for the better. Maybe so. Surely, however, not all outcomes are equally likely. Rather than set forth assumptions about what actually drives events in Iraq, pro-Bush conservatives prefer to surround their recommendations in a thicket of “mights,” “perhaps,” “coulds” and “ifs.” When describing the ultimate aim of the Iraq occupation, by contrast, their words become suddenly clarion: “the stakes are high,” “the terrorists must be defeated,” “victory is in sight.” The rhetorical shift is telling. Rather than feeling responsible for the consequences of its actions, it may be that the conservative movement today, in Weber’s words, “feels responsible only for seeing to it that the flame of pure intentions is not quenched.” One may think of this attitude what one will. It is not, however, right-wing. ■

**AUSTIN BRAMWELL** is a lawyer in New York City.

**Patrick J. Buchanan** Home from the beach Saturday last, I picked up *The Weekly Standard*. Within the magazine some still regard as the parish bulletin of the Beltway Right was an essay by one Noemie Emery furiously contesting Peter Beinart's claim to Harry Truman.

Harry belongs to us, insisted Ms. Emery. He was "heir to a great wartime president," she wrote. Would that be the same FDR who "lied us into war," whose regime was honey-combed with treason, who at Tehran and Yalta betrayed Poland and all of Eastern Europe to the barbarous tyrant he called "Uncle Joe"?

Freedom was "expanded by Roosevelt and Truman, who extended the welfare state," Ms. Emery continued. Good to know.

As for Ronald Reagan, he was "an original Truman Democrat and New Dealer [who] ... brought the Truman DNA into the Republican Party with a cadre of Scoop Jackson Democrats ..." To Emery, Reagan will go down in history as the Moses who led the neocons out of Egypt to the Promised Land: power. Reagan himself used to tell us Barry Goldwater was the John the Baptist of our movement.

And why is Emery "wild about Harry?" Operation Keelhaul? The defense of Alger Hiss? The loss of China to Maoism? The firing of General MacArthur? The offer to send the battleship *Missouri* to Russia to pick up Stalin and bring him over to respond to Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech? The "no-win war" in Korea?

No. Ms. Emery reveres FDR and Harry because they "planned, executed, and blessed a campaign so completely hair-raising that the horror remains to this day." FDR and Truman, you see, had the true grit to do Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. And so a "conservative" magazine claims Harry for our side.

What Ms. Emery's piece reveals is that conservatism today is as shot through with corruption as the Church of Pope Alexander VI, two of whose brood of bastards were Lucretia and Cesare Borgia.

We are in need of a Council of Trent to redefine who we are.

Still "conservative" remains a respected term and the right term for those who devote their lives to family, faith, community, and country. We ought not give up our good name to cross-dressers. As for Left and Right, they retain much of the meaning they have had since the French Revolution. And we are of the Vendée.

A few years ago, when called a "neo-isolationist," I wrote,

Most of us ... are not really 'neo-' anything. We are old church and old right, anti-imperialist and anti-interventionist, disbelievers in Pax Americana. We love the old republic, and when we hear phrases like 'New World Order,' we release the safety catches on our revolvers.

As in New Deal days, our Cultural Revolution, and the high times of the Great Society, a conservative today must be a counterrevolutionary. While Bush's judges and Supreme Court justices have been top of the line and his tax cuts conservative, his democracy crusade and his open-borders immigration policy, his Big Government conservatism and free-trade-über-alles globalism owe more to FDR and LBJ than Goldwater or Reagan.

But the returns are now coming in from the Bush experiment with a Rockefeller Republicanism that he calls "compassionate conservatism."

The rising casualties and soaring costs of an unnecessary war in Iraq, an overstretched military, immense trade deficits that must bring down the dollar, the loss of sovereignty and economic independence, a bloated federal bureaucracy to which Bushites have added as much as LBJ, an unresisted invasion over our southern border, the selling of the party of Reagan to the money power—all are the marks of an empire at the end of its tether.

What can save this Republic is the restoration of authentic values and policies of conservatism, imposed at some cost and hardship upon a people who may have lost the capacity and belief in the need to sacrifice to save what their fathers gave them.

In 1968, in *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, some of the writings of the conservative philosopher Richard Weaver were published. In the foreword, Donald Davidson wrote that his friend had, upon reading John Crowe Ransom's *God Without Thunder*, been taken with the idea that an "unorthodox defense of orthodoxy" might be feasible.

Weaver "was suddenly troubled by his realization," wrote Davidson, that "many traditional positions in our world had suffered not so much because of inherent defect as because of the stupidity, ineptness and intellectual sloth of those who ... are presumed to have their defense in charge."

Conservatives have seen their movement hijacked by ideological vagabonds and hustlers who are redefining it to mean what it never meant. We need to find who sold the pass. Before we can take back our country, we must take back our movement. ■

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**John Derbyshire** The terms "liberal" and "conservative" are only useful as a first approximation. If you tell me you are a liberal or a conservative, I have information about you I did not have before. Much of it is probabilistic: a conservative is more likely to be a churchgoer than a liberal, though there are liberal churchgoers and conservative atheists.

I think we all have a vague sense that these words describe the "shape" of our thinking about the outside

world. A liberal is a person more inclined to get angry about inequalities in society; a conservative, about restraints on freely-willed actions that are not indisputably harmful.

Going a bit deeper, conservatives are those who are pessimistic about the prospects for human nature and society. This is most obviously the case with romantic conservatives like Winston Churchill, who “preferred the past to the present and the present to the future,” and George Orwell, who “loved the past, hated the present, and dreaded the future.” Even a distinctly unromantic conservative like Dr. Johnson “laughed at schemes of political improvement,” though. In the U.S., where an optimistic attitude is more or less compulsory, all this is masked with a lot of uplifting squid ink like our current—not, in my opinion, very conservative—president’s professed belief that “the desire for freedom is

**“Present-day Left and Right are distinguished by which elites they prefer, not by a fondness for, or hostility to, elites in general.”**

inscribed on every human heart,” a thing that is obviously false. True conservatives everywhere, however, even in America, know that we are doomed, doomed.

Some confusion arises from the history and geography of these words. A conservative in Franco’s Spain, in Brezhnev’s Russia, and in today’s U.S. are very different creatures, though you could tease out common threads of outlook and personality. Hayek is a darling of modern conservatives, yet in the preface of *The Road to Serfdom* he is very dismissive of conservatism (“paternalistic, nationalistic, power-adoring, ... traditionalistic, anti-intellectual, and often mystical ...”) Margaret Thatcher and Herbert Hoover both insisted on calling themselves liberals, though both were much too conservative to be elected nowadays.

I am much taken with modern theories of brain function that describe our mental processes in terms of functional modules. One theory postulates (1) a “socialization” module that handles membership of groups: being accepted, defending the group, being aware of other groups, and (2) a “status” module that evaluates and promotes our status in the group (and other people’s statuses too), handling emotions like envy, ambition, humiliation.

If that is right, I would guess that liberals have more strength in their socialization module. They are more focused on co-operative action, group values, leveling, assigning importance to subgroups. Conservatives are stronger in the status module, not minding that some individuals stand above others and emphasizing individual action to enhance status.

That’s all guesswork. I am only trying to demonstrate that a physiological foundation for our liberal-conservative inclinations is possible. If this is the case, and if genomic-evolutionary pathways for the development of these modules can be established, the consequences might be very unsettling. It might turn out that a population with some below-threshold frequency of gene variant XYZ would have trouble socializing its people into a consensual nation-sized entity. I don’t say that’s so, but it might be. As Steve Sailer has said, it would be a good idea to hold off on mass immigration until we know more about this.

As I recall, the terms “left” and “right” started off in the French National Assembly during the run-up to that nation’s revolution. Those who favored equality for all under the law sat on the speaker’s left; those who thought that some people (nobles, churchmen) should continue to have privileged status in law sat on the right.

Those dispositions were morphed by time and circumstances. There came socialism, which insisted that not only should we have equal rights in law, but we should have equal slices of the gross national product. Then there is affirmative action, which argues that groups once deprived of rights should have extra rights till they have recovered from the consequences of the prior deprivation. I think these positions are correctly located on the Left.

Similarly with fascism, to the degree that it is a coherent political philosophy and not just an excuse for a gangster free-for-all. State power is an important feature of fascist nations, and that ought to count against fascism being a Right phenomenon, since strong centralized states were traditional enemies of both church and nobility and all secondary power centers. You can in fact make a case that fascism, which gives equality of rights to all in the group, with much-magnified awareness of and hostility towards other groups, is the “socialization module” run amok and therefore hyper-leftist. If you track things back to source, though, giving more rights to this group and fewer to that group is Right according to the original Assembly seating arrangement, so that the popular conception of fascism as a Right pathology has a lot to be said for it.

With socialism and fascism both pretty decisively vanquished, how do the Left and Right impulses work themselves out today? With most features of political thought and emotion—patriotism, liberty vs. equality, fondness for established institutions, skepticism about social progress—you can track back a line of development to those original Left-Right arrangements.

But what, for example, do we do with elitism? It is traditionally associated with the Right yet is too ingrained a feature of human groups to be decisively assigned to either faction. Present-day Left and Right are distinguished by which elites they prefer, not by a fondness for, or hostility to, elites in general.



This comes up in the context of globalization. In one aspect, it is certainly Left, an evolution from that original notion of equality under the law to the proposition that it is wrong for Americans to favor their fellow Americans over foreigners in any way. Probably several million Americans believe that citizenship is a racist concept. I think we would all place such people definitely on the Left.

On the other hand, there are many reasons for ordinary people to resist globalization, and so many publicly-funded plum jobs for the right people in the globalist bureaucracy, that there inevitably arises the kind of supercilious, privileged, and increasingly endogamous elite characteristic of the folk sitting on the right in that original Assembly.

I would say that since the globalized elites offend the Right's sense of patriotism—our favoring of this nation, this people—and since, being largely unelected, they can violate our personal liberty or dismantle our institutions with few consequences to themselves, we should place globalization firmly on the Left, notwithstanding the fact that it offers some freedoms (of migration, of commerce) not previously available and sets up a managerial elite. The case is certainly arguable, though.

The world is way more complicated than it was in 1789, and the concepts Left and Right don't capture all that complexity. I have some math books showing five-dimensional solid figures projected down into two dimensions so that they can be printed on an ordinary page. That's the kind of thing we do when we talk about Left and Right. Like those geometric projections, it's not very satisfactory; but it's not useless, either. ■

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**Ross Douthat** The most welcome rhetorical ploy of the last decade was the decision by liberals tired of being tagged with the dreaded l-word to re-label themselves as “progressives.” Liberalism and conservatism have always been ill-matched antonyms, since the former refers to a set of political philosophies—Lockean liberalism, Rawlsian liberalism, and so forth—whereas the latter is something more nebulous, an orientation toward the world rather than a programmatic approach to it. The term “progressive,” with its implied utopianism, is a more precise antonym for “conservative,” and fans of linguistic precision should join subscribers to *The American Prospect* in applauding its revival.

Still, if one accepts that when people say liberal they usually mean progressive, then the liberal/conservative binary is still a useful way of looking at politics in the West and

increasingly worldwide. It's true that neither term is exact enough to enable an observer to discern the definitive “conservative” or “liberal” line on every policy issue and cultural controversy. But even so, if you call someone a conservative or a liberal, anyone willing to accept a touch of ambiguity in their definitions ought to understand what you mean.

Liberals are Baconists: they believe in Francis Bacon's dictum that the ends of politics are “the conquest of nature for the relief of man's estate.” A conservative, meanwhile, is anyone who either says no to Baconism, or who says yes, but only up to a point—and so conservatism embraces anyone who has jumped off liberalism's fast-moving train at any point over the last five centuries. If you're a monarchist who thinks that liberalism went wrong with John Locke and the Glorious Revolution, step on up. If you're a West Coast Straussian who thinks it went wrong with Woodrow Wilson,

**“They were unwilling to give up freedom for the sake of progress, but they're happy to give up virtue.”**

then welcome aboard. And if you're a neocon who loved the New Deal but found the Great Society and George McGovern to be a bridge too far, there's a place for you as well.

But here's the rub, and the reason for a great deal of recent conservative confusion: the Right actually won a victory in the latter half of the 20th century, after centuries of defeat, and turned modernity away from a particularly pernicious path. This unexpected triumph has meant that many people who became accustomed to calling themselves “conservatives” when the conquest of nature seemed to require socialism or Communism are back on board the Baconian train, racing happily down a different track into the brave new future. These are the people who insist that conservatism ought to mean “freedom from government interference” and nothing more—the Grover Norquists of the world, for instance, or the Arnold Schwarzeneggers. In fact, they are ex-conservatives, because they are no longer sufficiently uncomfortable with the trajectory of modernity to be counted among its critics. They were unwilling to give up freedom for the sake of progress, but they're happy to give up virtue.

The picture is further complicated by the fact that because conservatism only really exists to say “no” to whatever liberalism asks for next, it fights nearly all its battles on its enemy's terrain and rarely comes close to articulating a coherent set of values of its own. Liberalism has science and progress to pursue—and ultimately immortality, the real goal but also the one that rarely dares to speak its name—whereas conservatives have ... well, a host of goals, most of them in tension with one another. Neoconservatives want to return us to the New Deal era; Claremont Instituters want

to revive the spirit of the Founding; Jacksonians want to rescue American nationalism from the one-worlders and post-patriots; agrarians and Crunchy Cons pine for a lost Jeffersonian or Chestertonian arcadia. Some conservatives think that liberalism-the-political-philosophy can be saved from liberalism-the-Baconian-project and that modernity can be rescued from its utopian temptation; others join Alasdair MacIntyre in thinking that the hour is far too late for that, and we should withdraw into our homes and monasteries and prepare to guard the permanent things through a long Dark Age.

Liberals, on the other hand, dream the same dream and envision the same destination, even if they disagree on exactly how to get there. It's the dream of Thomas Friedman as well as Karl Marx, as old as Babel and as young as the South Korean cloners. It whispered to us in Eden, and it whispers to us now: ye shall be as gods. And no conservative dream, in the 400 years from Francis Bacon until now, has proven strong enough to stand in its way. ■

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**Rod Dreher** Nearly 20 years ago, the leftist critic Christopher Lasch said something that must have struck most people as odd: that the terms “conservative” and “liberal” have outlived their usefulness and serve more to obscure our understanding of the conditions under which Americans live than to illumine them. Given the partisan passions of the day—the Reagan era was coming to an end—and the vast stores of energy that both liberals and conservatives had remaining for the battles ahead, it's easy to understand why it was hard to see Lasch's point. From where we stand today, with liberalism intellectually exhausted (still!), and a once vigorous conservatism having no idea how to rescue itself from its own shipwreck of the last five years, Lasch—who died in 1994—looks prophetic. It's time that the rest of us catch up with him.

I assume readers of this magazine don't need to be instructed on what a dead end liberalism is. But if the Bush administration and the Republican misrule of the Congress don't make conservatives rethink our approach to politics, we are in miserable shape. The conventional conservative response, of course, is to say that Republicans failed to be sufficiently conservative—a neat trick that absolves us from having to consider how the problem could well be with our ideas themselves. Lasch forces us to consider that what we've been identifying as conservatism really isn't conservative at all, but merely an older form of liberalism. Or as philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has similarly observed, “the

contemporary debates within modern political systems are almost exclusively between conservative liberals, liberal liberals, and radical liberals.”

What does this mean? At the risk of oversimplifying, American politics today are built around the sovereignty of the individual, with progress measured across the board by the degree to which the individual is emancipated to exercise his own will. Liberals tend to favor emancipation from constraints on sexual activity, while conservatives tend to favor emancipation from constraints on economic activity. Neither questions the basic assumption that “freedom” means an expansion of individual choice. While both liberal and conservative politicians will differ on the implications of this conviction, it has become sacrosanct in American politics today. No politician dares to appeal to the American people with a message of material sacrifice for some higher goal. We are consumers before we are citizens.

It seems to me that few of us are willing to look radically—meaning, at the roots—of the American way of life and whether it can be sustained. Over a decade ago, Wendell Berry, the Kentucky agrarian and essayist, wrote a devastating essay called “Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community” in which he dissected how Left and Right, with their complementary doctrines of expanding sexual and economic freedom, undermined the kinds of traditions necessary to hold community life together. Lasch took this critique—which is generally shared by conservatives of an older tradition—much further. He condemned the Left for its vanity and contempt for ordinary people and the Right for uncritically celebrating a market-oriented individualism that conserves nothing, least of all the traditional values the Right purports to defend. “What is traditional about the rejection of tradition, continuity, and rootedness? A conservatism that sides with the forces of restless mobility is a false conservatism. ... Instead of confronting the forces in modern life that make for disorder, it proposes merely to make Americans feel good about themselves.”

While not remotely being tempted to apostasize to the Left, thoughtful conservatives will wonder whether the Republican Party and the conservative movement, as it is now constituted, are worth hoping and believing in. This is not to say that conservatives won't continue to vote Republican, if only as the lesser of two evils. But it is to say that the time has come to think and talk politically but beyond the conventional categories that have degenerated into empty ritualism and assertions of tribal identity.

I have been impressed—haunted is the more honest term—by Professor MacIntyre's famous conclusion to his influential 1981 book *After Virtue*, in which he argued that the radical individualism of the Enlightenment had reached its end in a morally incoherent and therefore unstable society. MacIntyre ended his book by suggesting that we might

well be living in a time akin to the breakup of the Roman Empire, when people stopped believing in what you might call the main organizing principle of their society and instead pioneered new forms of community in which to live out the moral life. He raised St. Benedict of Nursia, the father of European monasticism (and indeed, in many ways of Europe) as an example of the kind of figure we need now.

I'm not as pessimistic as MacIntyre, not yet at least, but I find my political imagination engaged by the prospect of a revived Benedictinism in our time. I'm not talking about a neo-Amish quietism but instead about forming loose associations of tradition-minded folks committed to living out the virtues in community, as much as we are able, and building local communities with our time, our labor, and our consumer dollars. Buying your meat directly from a local farmer might just be a more noble and useful political act than writing a check to the GOP. The work my politically liberal friend David Spence does in Dallas—buying abandoned historic properties in the inner city and restor-

**“Buying your meat directly from a local farmer might just be a more noble and useful political act than writing a check to the GOP.”**

ing them lovingly for office and residential space—strikes me as one of the most authentically conservative things anybody in the country is doing. There is nothing ideological about it, either, but to grasp the real meaning of what David is doing, and what the Hale and Hutchins families—Christian fundamentalist farm families who raise meat organically, as they believe God intended—are doing out in rural east Texas, you have to think beyond superficial ideological categories.

Absent some catastrophe, American politics at the macro level will no doubt lumber along on its present dreary course. Real change will happen at the margins, where creative thinkers can emerge. Here's hoping that in the months and years to come, those of us, Christians and otherwise, who might be thought of as Friends of St. Benedict will find each other and figure out practical ways to preserve the traditional moral life and to strengthen communal bonds against an atomizing, hedonistic, and alienating popular culture—and against two political parties—that seeks, however unwittingly in the case of many conservatives, to sever us from our roots. ■

**ROD DREHER** is an editor at the Dallas Morning News and is author of *Crunchy Cons* (Crown Forum), which will be published in paperback this fall.

**Mary Eberstadt** The Republican Party today is riven by two particular issues with which *American Conservative* readers are more familiar than many other citizens: the war in Iraq and the ongoing fact of illegal immigration. Yet neither division of opinion on the Right, I would argue, spells the end of the conservative/liberal divide as we know it.

First, and contrary to what is often asserted, neither immigration nor the war in Iraq can be settled by appeal to conservative first principles of any stripe. Consider Iraq. The ostensible justification for the war—removal of a perceived threat to the United States in the form of an implacably hostile dictator who had already demonstrated willingness and ability to use weapons of mass destruction against enemies—was one to which liberals as well as conservatives could sign on. And so many did.

The war may yet prove to be a tragic mistake. It may yet go down in history as the definitive refutation of the subspecies of conservative foreign-policy ideas known as “democratism.” On the other hand, it may also yet prove, as proponents argue it will, to have a salutary effect on other governments in the region, working in the long run to America's benefit. However it is ultimately judged by posterity, the war in Iraq is not, and cannot properly be called, a conservative war. It was dictated and justified in the first instance not by political principles but by an extra-ideological perception (correct or incorrect) of imminent threat. Thus the war, controversial though it is, does not re-draw the red-blue state divide that exists independently of it and for other reasons.

Similarly, the conservative division over immigration does not spell the end of that same divide, either. There is nothing intrinsic to the traditions of conservative thought in any form—whether the Founding Fathers, Edmund Burke, Abraham Lincoln, Whittaker Chambers, Russell Kirk, writers of Catholic or evangelical or libertarian bent, or indeed in any other right-leaning thinker of note—to settle what will always be a perplexing question: how is a nation of immigrants to draw the line on other immigrants? It is a difficult question, perhaps even an impossible question; but there is no intrinsically conservative (or liberal) answer to it.

Does a conservative welcome the work ethic and overall traditionalism of the Mexican migrant, thus pressing for laws that make legal immigration less restrictive—or does he build a wall in the name of conserving what is already here? Of course it is considered more conservative than liberal to argue for simply applying the law. But at a time when it is exactly the question of which law is best for the country, the enforcement principle is of limited utility as any ultimate political guide. Thus this question of what to do about illegal immigration, like that of the rightness or wrongness of the war in Iraq, is fundamentally extra-ideological. So

here too, we see no evidence for the demise of the liberal-conservative distinction.

On the other hand, if we look beyond these two particular issues in dispute, we see enduring reasons for conservatism—as opposed perhaps to the current Republican Party’s—ongoing ideological and moral appeal to many millions, indeed to judge by numerous polls a plurality, of Americans. After all, despite real disenchantment among many on the Right, the overall conservative realignment of the United States remains one of the biggest political stories of the past quarter century. Whatever the particular fortunes of the Republican Party one year, two years, or five years hence, the United States as a whole, as a torrent of polls confirms, as progressives foreign and domestic regularly complain, and as the red and blue map makes unforgettably clear, has plainly moved Right.

Thus, in one sense, it is tempting to answer the question of whether conservatism and liberalism as such still exist as Samuel Johnson is said to have refuted Bishop Berkeley’s subjective idealism by kicking a stone: i.e., by pointing to the color chart and leave it at that. More interesting, though, is to ask why this strength continues despite the contemporary disputes that are otherwise dividing the Right.

Having just concluded editing and writing for a forthcoming anthology called *Why I Turned Right*, in which a dozen thinkers representing conservative institutions and magazines explain what led them away from liberalism and centrism and toward their current positions in what is generally called the conservative world of ideas, I can sketch at least some version of an answer based on the common denominators of these converts’ tales.

First, conservatism and liberalism continue to exist, in one sense, because the *New York Times* and its allies everywhere say so; i.e., “they” know their adversaries when they see them, and that means “us.”

## “Conservatism continues and is only as strong as its positive rather than negative visions.”

Second, the binary divide also exists as long as the phrase “pro-life liberal” remains an oxymoron. For though not all conservatives are pro-life, nearly all pro-lifers have come to see themselves, and are seen by others, as “conservative” in some usable sense of the word. And so they are, if only by default. They simply haven’t anywhere else to go.

Third, the binary divide also exists as long as the universities, especially the elite universities, continue to exile sanity and tenure illogic and turn otherwise apolitical people against political correctness; that is how some converts to the Right are first pulled in.

Fourth—and this is a guarded point at a time when what is called the natural family is as perilous as it is today—conservatism as we know it exists in part because people as we know them reproduce. “I became a conservative at 11:59 pm on December 4th, 1997, the way many people become conservatives,” as contributor P.J. O’Rourke puts it in a formulation that will resonate with many. “I became a parent.”

If there is a mini-moral here, it appears to be that conservatism continues and is only as strong as its positive rather than negative visions. Of course there remains much to depress any observer, conservative or otherwise, about the current scene. But as to whether a fundamental realignment of our binary political code has been worked, I believe the evidence for now at least shows otherwise. Admittedly, conservatism for now trumps contemporary liberalism partly by default—but that is still a win, if not the most satisfactory one. ■

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**Nick Gillespie** As a small-“l” libertarian—a believer in “free minds and free markets” (to quote my magazine’s tagline), open immigration, civil liberties, educational and reproductive choice, gun rights, pluralism, noninterventionist foreign policy, drug legalization, gay marriage, and perhaps most scandalously of all, a world of meaning far beyond politics in which people are generally free to pursue individual and communal happiness on something approaching their own terms—it’s hard to get too worked up over whether the terms “liberal” and “conservative” mean much anymore. This is sort of like trying to decide whether Razzles are really a candy or a gum: it’s drawing a distinction that doesn’t amount to much of a difference. From the first bite to the last, you still end up with a bad taste in your mouth.

At least since the reign of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, American politics have been marked by a broad consensus that the role and scope of government should be big and bigger. This consensus, reflected most clearly in the upward trajectory of public spending at all levels and the willingness of politicians to insinuate themselves via legislation, regulation, and moral grandstanding into every aspect of our lives, is so pervasive that the supposed great gutter of government, Ronald Reagan, described himself—accurately—as a New Deal Democrat. To be sure, liberals and conservatives—and their political proxies, the Democrats and Republicans—have sometimes differed in the ends toward which



they swing the government club, but neither crew has been slow to pick up the cudgel in the first place. Certainly over the past dozen years that the Republicans have controlled both houses of Congress, it's become increasingly difficult for someone not born and bred for partisan loyalty to figure out the operative differences between Dems and Reps, liberals and conservatives. Whatever other crimes he may have committed, Rep. Tom DeLay should go to jail for suggesting last fall that "after 11 years of Republican majority we pared [the federal budget] down pretty good." Or if not jail, then a hospital for the politically delusional (though I understand that there are few beds available at present).

Hence, we're well into the second-term of a conservative president who has boosted real discretionary spending more than Lyndon Baines Johnson managed. In his first four budgets, Bush boosted discretionary spending by over 35 percent, compared to LBJ's 33 percent hike over the homologous period. And, alas, when it comes to foreign policy, Bush has similarly out-LBJed LBJ. Unless you're slavishly devoted to the party of Walter Mondale or the party of Bob Dole, does it really matter, say, whether it's liberal Rep. Nancy Pelosi or conservative Sen. Rick Santorum pushing for a minimum-wage increase? Whether it's Sen. Ted Stevens pushing for content regulation of cable and satellite TV or Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton spearheading an attack on the dread menace of video games? Sen. Trent Lott or Sen. Robert Byrd shipping the federal treasury to constituents back home a dollar at a time? Attorney General Janet Reno or Attorney General John Ashcroft pushing for a surveillance state?

It's an old joke—among libertarians, anyway, a famously funny group (just read the novels of Ayn Rand sometime)—that conservatives want to be your father and liberals want to be your mother. Despite superficial differences, both groups want to be your parent and treat you as a child who must be shielded from your own worst impulses. This isn't to say that specific policies and individual politicians don't matter, but it is to suggest that in the aggregate, liberals and conservatives are less like Cain and Abel and more like Chang and Eng.

Yet we thankfully live in an age of glorious ideological confusion. The old, worn-out designations Right and Left—a pentimento of early revolutionary France—are finally breaking down under the weight of current events and in the face of continuing technological and cultural changes that are giving more and more of us the ability to live however we want. The war in Iraq and the current immigration debate, to name two pressing issues, are pitting conservatives against one another and causing liberals no small intra-ideological squabbles.

More important, Americans are evacuating partisan politics. This is reflected in generally weaker attachments to the Democrats and Republicans. In 1969, according to a Harris

poll, 81 percent of Americans identified themselves as one or the other. By 2004, only 65 percent did. If anecdote can be trusted, I'm heartened by the number of liberals and conservatives who sidle up to me at policy debates, book parties, and other grim affairs and confess with a mixture of shame and pride that they have unmistakable libertarian tendencies. However inaccurate such hyphenated designations may be, it's no small curiosity that Noam Chomsky from time to time calls himself a "libertarian socialist" and William F. Buckley occasionally self-identifies as a "libertarian journalist."

That's progress, and it suggests that the best way to understand contemporary politics is not through a right-wing/left-wing, conservative/liberal, Republican/Democrat frame but in terms of choice and control: does a particular policy or politician increase or decrease our freedom? In his underappreciated 1955 masterpiece, *The Decline of American Liberalism*, Arthur A. Ekirch Jr. wrote that American history from the colonial period on has been a struggle between forces of centralization and decentralization in politics, economics, and culture. He fretted that the "liberal values associated with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment—and especially that of individual freedom—have slowly lost their primary importance in America life and thought." I think he was mistaken in his conclusion, but his larger analysis provides a key to the 21st century. Because of widely observed increases in wealth, advances in liberatory technology, and breakdowns of stultifying social and cultural orthodoxies, individuals in America are freer than ever to chart their own destinies (we'd be freer still in a world of truly limited government). If we finally jettison played-out designations and think in terms of choice and control, our current moment would come into far-clearer focus. And so would our future. ■

**NICK GILLESPIE** is editor in chief of *Reason*, recently named one of "The 50 Best Magazines" by the *Chicago Tribune*.

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**Paul Gottfried** Defining the Right may be easier than defining the Left. The Right resists the Left with determination, however the Left may define itself at a given point in time. It is not hard to locate a place on the Right for the octagenarian warrior against feminism, immigration, and alternative lifestyles Phyllis Schlafly. But the same cannot be done so easily for David Brooks, the *New York Times*' "conservative columnist," who favors gay marriage and liberal immigration and who is now talking up Hillary Clinton as a presidential candidate.

The Right is not just a watered-down version of its antithesis. It is passionately against the Left and in favor of what is intact of a bourgeois Christian society. But the Left—mar-

shalling mostly united armies of the media, educational establishment, and entertainment industry—has been able to create its own opposition. Thus the media establishment has given lots of coverage and newspaper columns to neo-conservative critics, who accept most of the same picture of social and historical progress as the one embraced by the acknowledged left-center. By this duplication of itself as an oppositional force, the Left has removed from discussion the kinds of questions that only the real Right would engage. It can therefore limit debate to secondary issues, such as whether our borders are to be protected less negligently once illegals are granted de facto amnesty, without having to bring up such fundamental questions as the value of defending an inherited cultural identity in the U.S.

The true Right has covered a wide historical terrain depending on the type of Left that it has had to confront. In the interwar period, at least some elements of the European bourgeoisie rallied to fascist movements, which were thought to be able to oppose the Communists and other revolutionary leftists better than the weakened parliamentary governments of the time. In Spain and Austria, the bourgeoisie were generally correct in the 1930s to support the authoritarian Right as the lesser of two evils; in Mussolini's Italy, bourgeois supporters of the fascist government may have been justified in their initial endorsement of the "fascist revolution," given the history of anarchist violence that had given rise to the revolutionary Right. In Germany, however, a different situation existed. There the Nazis did not furnish a bulwark against organized violence and, like the Communists, were a variation on the anti-bourgeois forces of political and moral upheaval.

**“The term ‘conservative’ has lost any specific or long-term meaning and has been extended to leftist projects such as conquering the world for human rights.”**

The Right that has survived no longer talks, in the manner of Latin fascists, about a corporate economy and a national revolution. It is in fact critical of government overreach and generally favors local control over political life. But what makes this Right what it is today is its reaction to the democratic welfare state as a vehicle of leftist change.

Another defining characteristic of the Right is its distinctiveness in relation to conservatism. The term “conservative” has lost any specific or long-term meaning and has been extended to leftist projects such as conquering the world for human rights. But at one time that term did have a grounded meaning, for example, when Edmund Burke and his conti-

mental counterparts resisted the French Revolution, as defenders of a traditional society, an established church, and a monarchy. The organically developed, historical rights that these textbook conservatives defended belonged to a bygone world, even if these thinkers, as social theorist Robert Nisbet spent much of his life arguing, still deserve our respect.

In the 19th century, the bourgeoisie assumed the work of defending nation states, a market economy, and strong nuclear families. The bourgeoisie would eventually give life to the modern Right as well. This would happen when those traditions came under attack, first from revolutionary socialists, then from democratic administration, and most recently from the multicultural Left.

“Right” and “conservative” are sometimes applied interchangeably, but these terms of reference do not share the same genealogy. Conservative is the now anachronistic description of a contemporary political side, one that, like its official opposition, is social democratic in its beliefs. The Right, by contrast, denotes an existing but weakened political force.

A key dividing line between the Right and other political positions is its appeal to the people in opposition to political elites. In *The Revolt of the Elites*, Christopher Lasch exemplifies this right-wing populism. Lasch exudes praise for “the people,” who seem drawn from a 1950s vignette of a Catholic working-class family. His ideal wife is depicted as packing her husband's lunch pail and then preparing her offspring for their departure to parochial school. Against this charming but archaic conception of “the people,” Lasch portrays the elites who are besotted with vice and have no attachments to either nations or communities. The question that is never posed, and one that right-wing populists studiously avoid, is how did this Catholic working-class family permit social degenerates to take power? And why do they waste their hard-earned money on consumerist products produced by those whom they are supposed to despise?

The major change that the Left has undergone over the last 30 years is the replacement of an economically-oriented socialist persuasion by a multicultural one. Up until the 1960s, the Left invoked Marxism or some more diluted, gradualist road to socialism. This Left was not necessarily concerned with feminist or gay issues. The present Left, by contrast, accentuates lifestyle radicalism. It even urges the state to punish those who hold reactionary moral views. The updated Left plays down such old-style socialist goals as nationalizing productive forces, and it favors the market when commerce can be used to break down regional and national barriers and to achieve cultural diversity.

The current Left swoons over Third World immigrants, a group whom it celebrates as a source of cultural enrichment. It is also willing to tax its majority European population to pay for the cultural comfort and social services of

those whom it happily welcomes from the Third World. But these gestures should not be equated with recrudescing Stalinism or authentic European socialism. The Left assumed a new identity when its working-class base began to dwindle and when it traded that base for yuppies and self-assertive Third World constituencies. The Left then proceeded to move in a culturally radical direction, a development whose consequences we are now seeing. ■

**PAUL GOTTFRIED** is professor of the humanities at Elizabethtown College and author, most recently, of *The Strange Death of Marxism*.

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**Jeffrey Hart** The terms “liberal” and “conservative” remain in current usage and probably retain value, but the question is a tricky one. We will begin with definitions, but things get difficult when we try to apply the terms to actual politicians and their policies.

Let’s start with Hobbes and Locke and their assumptions about human nature. For Hobbes, man’s heart was savage. In the mythic pre-social “state of nature,” life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” That required the restraints of strong government. For Locke, in contrast, “the state of nature has a law of nature to govern it ... and reason ... is that law.” Thus the restraints of government could be mild. Perhaps Hobbes was conservative, Locke liberal.

Burke, rather than starting with assumptions about human nature, began with experience and shared history. In practice, he was a reformist Whig. For example, advocating prudence, he urged conciliation with the American colonies, offering everything except formal independence. Adam Smith said that Burke was the only man in England who understood his economic theory; but Burke also urged the importance of the “unbought grace of life.” He would not approve of everything-has-a-price capitalism.

Burke is thought to be a conservative. He did attack the French Revolution. But if we strip away such operative passages as the one on Marie Antoinette, Burke should be understood as a critic of ideology, “abstract ideas,” “metaphysical dogma.” To the Rights of Man urged by the *philosophes*, he opposed the actual historic liberties of Englishmen.

Let us try to cut to the core of Burke’s thought. I first tried this in a Columbia graduate seminar taught by Jacques Barzun and Lionel Trilling. I offered this: “Most of the things we do are done by habit. If you tried to tie your shoes every morning by reason, you would never get out of the house. Try playing a violin by reason.” Barzun accepted this and raised me. “Burke,” he said, “wants his morning newspaper delivered on time.” In other words, social institutions are the habits of society. They make society work.

But suppose serious change becomes necessary. For Burke, you don’t judge change necessary by appealing to abstractions, to pamphleteers and journalists. You appeal to the man of experience, the statesman. In the *Reflections*, the statesman is Lord Somers, who knew the institutions of England and knew in 1688 that James II had to go. That kind of knowledge cannot be taught but only absorbed from experience.

Everyone knows that Burke opposed the abstract doctrines he saw as energizing the French Revolution. Less often realized is that he soon came to see the Revolution as inevitable, without, of course, withdrawing any of his hatred of ideology. In 1791, he wrote:

If a great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it; the general opinions and feelings will draw that way. Every fear, every hope will forward it; and then they, who persist in opposing this mighty current in human affairs, will appear rather to resist the decrees of Providence itself, than the mere designs of men. They will not be resolute and firm, but perverse and obstinate.

In the *Reflections*, more than a year earlier, Burke had not been Burkean enough. The complexities of society can include, as well as complex institutional structure, complex social forces that become irresistible: the French monarchy had been doomed by the accumulation of such forces.

Burke was a conservative in the sense of William Buckley’s definition of conservatism as the “politics of reality.” Unfortunately, many supposed conservatives—I will echo T.S. Eliot’s phrase—“cannot bear very much reality.”

Let us try a few notes on presidents and their success or failure in dealing with reality. Through many needed economic reforms, such as the SEC, it can be argued—Conrad Black and other historians have done so—that Franklin Roosevelt saved capitalism. In that sense, in dealing with realities and not ideology, he was conservative. He was also bipartisan in his war leadership and unanimously considered a great war leader.

Harry Truman, a liberal Democrat—the Henry Wallace Left did not think him liberal enough, the Strom Thurmond segregationists thought him too liberal—was also a realist. Against the segregationists, Truman knew the civil-rights revolution was gestating. Against the Wallace Left, he knew the Soviets had to be blocked.

Eisenhower adopted a fatherly persona. But in fact, he was realistic, lucid, even ruthless. He knew the old empires were finished, refused to help the British and French at Suez, refused to help the French in Vietnam. He knew the New Deal could not be repealed, and of Sen. William Knowland, the right-wing hero, he asked, “How stupid can one get?” A

complete realist, Eisenhower won re-election in a landslide and, with Franklin Roosevelt and Reagan, another prudent realist, is among the top ten presidents.

That brings us to George W. Bush, the most ideological president in American history. He thinks in abstractions and acts on them. No president stands at a greater remove from Burke's critique of ideology. His foreign policy—the march of democracy—is immune to fact and, notably in Iraq, to a Burkean sense of history. In economics (supply-side dogma, calamitous debt), in science (Intelligent Design), in his opposition to stem-cell research and therapy, Bush has been a brass-bound ideologue. On stem-cell research, Bush formulates his opposition this way: “It’s wrong to destroy life in order to save life.” His first use of the word “life” refers to a few insensate cells, his second to an actual sick human being. His formulation is self-refuting. As an exercise in the use of the “moral imagination”—a term coined by Burke—let us cut through verbiage to concrete fact: if you had a child with Type I diabetes, a devastating disease, and I said I had a few cells that would cure her, would you turn this offer down? The question answers itself. It also answers Bush.

The common denominator of successful presidents, liberal or conservative, has been that they were realists. Because Bush is an ideologue remote from fact, he has failed comprehensively and surely is the worst president in American history—indeed, in the damage he has caused to the nation, without a rival in the race for the bottom. Because Bush is generally called a conservative, he will have poisoned the term for decades to come. ■

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**Nicholas von Hoffman** The words “liberal” and “conservative” may be meaningless to anyone given to precise definition, but they remain useful for fisticuffs, serving as verbal mud pies in political disputes.

True, calling someone a conservative is not the same bone-crusher as calling someone a liberal. The latter epithet is so damaging that people who have been scored off as fuzzy, liberal caterpillars have been known to hump off under a leaf in hopes of re-emerging as brilliantly attractive, progressive butterflies.

But even though the progressive label may afford a degree of cover, there is something wishy-washy about the word. A progressive is a blanched liberal, and those who adopt the name rarely fool anyone. Of late the ruse has been so uncon-

vincing that professional politicians are reconciling themselves to donning the hair shirt of liberalism again.

There is no conservative counterpart to the liberal who blushes and fidgets when the name is applied to him. Conservatives take pride in the appellation as they fight abortion, flag burning, and the love that once dared not say its name but now shouts it from the rooftops. Only lately have they begun to encounter occasions when it’s an embarrassment. The longer George W. Bush and his confederates remain in office the more frequently such instances occur.

Past that, the liberal-conservative polarity has disappeared. The guiding principles that distinguished the two once great schools of thought are not doing much guiding. When a faction inside the American Civil Liberties Union is evidently trying to gag an opposing faction from publicly expressing dissent, we are wading around in a swamp.

Bipolar politics is our tradition, but the old poles have lost their magnetism and, for the moment, reconstituting them seems impossible. What would a new conservatism or new liberalism look like? What principles would it steer by? And if not two parties, how about three or four or ten? A non-starter. Our laws and political institutions are so stoutly designed for bipolar politics that multi-polarity does not have a chance. Even if it did, in a country that is having trouble scraping together two political parties founded on something other than nonsense, a multi-party system looks less than promising. There are days when it seems we don’t have enough decent political ideas to stock even one.

In lieu of political parties based on stately essays by the great thinkers of the past, we can continue with what we have—which is crisis politics. Whoever comes up with the most frightening crisis wins. Of late it has been the Republicans, whether conservative or not, who have delivered the knockout punches. Dead babies, dirty bombs, men exchanging wedding bands with other men, toppling skyscrapers, evil Arabs, girl bishops—they’ve swept the Democrats, whether liberal or not, out of contention. Not that the D’s don’t have hopes. It has been said that the Democrats are but one Katrina away from seizing power.

None of the above has much to do with any conservative-liberal continuum. It has to do with how one political gang can jump on what’s happening at the moment and cash in on it. But then polarities of principle, the grand abstractions that are so hard to apply, have seldom dominated our government policy. If it were otherwise, the Concord Coalition would not be a flyspeck of a group, unknown outside the small world of policy wonkery.

So what does the future hold? Many symposia, that much is certain. What else? Many ad hoc alliances between different parts of the busted-up ideological centers of the now defunct Right-Left cores. A recent example of such was the coalition of libertarians, conservatives, and lefties renting



the Daughters of the American Revolution Hall on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday to hear Al Gore thunder on the topic of civil rights and civil liberties.

More broadly, the terms conservative and liberal will continue to be used and misused as we, who doubt we are a part of either, stumble in the swamp, looking for a solid place to put our feet. ■

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**James Kurth** It certainly now seems that the terms “liberal” and “conservative” fit the realities of American politics very poorly. The existence of such new, but also confusing, terms as “neoliberal” and especially “neoconservative” is one obvious illustration. However, we will argue that some version of this confusion has long characterized American politics, indeed is the essence of American politics, and that liberal and conservative still remain the most useful terms we are likely to have, now and in the future.

Suppose that one had to invent, to build from the ground up, new labels to fit the actual, contemporary, major divisions within American politics. We would first start with a specification of just what those divisions are. To begin with, there is the great divide over social, cultural, or moral issues (as in “the culture war” and “moral values”). Here there is a clear division between those Americans whose priority is the free choice and expression of the individual and those who prefer to subordinate this individual freedom to religious (specifically, biblical) teachings or traditional norms. The first tendency especially reveres the First Amendment of the Constitution; the second tendency especially reveres the Ten Commandments of the Bible. In addition, the first tendency admires the values now found among the political and cultural elites of other Western democracies (which they call “universal human rights”); the second tendency is attached to distinctly American values (American exceptionalism). Most political analysts, not only in the media but also in academia, are perfectly comfortable with applying the terms liberal and conservative respectively to these two tendencies (as in “social” or “cultural liberals” and “social” or “cultural conservatives”).

Second, there is the great and long-standing divide over security issues. Here there is a clear division between those Americans whose priority is individual liberty, particularly the freedom of movement and association of individuals and also of members of minority communities (civil liberties and civil rights) and those whose priority is national security,

who prefer to constrain the movement and associations of some individuals (and of some minorities), if that would enhance the security of the nation (and of the majority) as a whole. Again, most political analysts, not only in the media but also in academia, are perfectly comfortable with applying the terms liberal and conservative respectively to these two tendencies.

Thus far, our terminological construction project has been rather simple. Liberals are those Americans who prioritize individual freedom over anything else; conservatives are those who are willing to subordinate this to traditional values or community interests, e.g., a religion or the nation. However, in America confusion has always arisen when we turn our attention to economic issues.

This adds a third great, and very long-standing, divide in American politics. Here there is a clear division between those Americans whose priority is the freedom of individual entrepreneurs or corporate enterprises (“free enterprise,” “the free market”) and those who prefer to subordinate this individual freedom to government regulation and limitation. Today, and for many years, most political analysts have applied the term conservative to the first tendency and liberal to the second (as in “economic” or “fiscal conservatives” and “economic” or “fiscal liberals”).

We now can see why in America the terms liberal and conservative have often been confusing and awkward. The liberals generally favor individual expression on the social and security issues but government regulation on the economic ones. Conversely, the conservatives generally favor restraining individual expression by government regulation (or preferably by self-restraint informed by religious teachings or by traditional and patriotic values) on the social and security issues but free enterprise on the economic ones.

**“Liberals generally favor individual expression on the social and security issues but government regulation on the economic ones.”**

Social conservatives, security conservatives, and economic conservatives all tend to support the Republican Party. But their different priorities over the freedom of the individual make for a great deal of tensions, indeed divisions, within the party itself. Most obviously, richer, business (“country-club”) Republicans generally promote economic conservatism and downplay (or even privately despise) social conservatism. Conversely, poorer, employee (“Main Street”) Republicans generally prioritize social conservatism and downplay economic conservatism. The first tendency provides the campaign dollars for the Republicans;

the second tendency provides the actual votes. It is little wonder that the Republican Party has been a chronic schizophrenic, and is especially so today.

In the past three decades, moreover, the project of globalization has brought about the expansion of the American economy into the global economy, with the free movement of goods, capital, and labor across open borders. Some Americans have benefited from globalization (“the winners”) and some have been hurt (“the losers”). This has brought about a new division over economic issues. Some Americans, especially the winners from globalization, prioritize this new version of free enterprise operating across open borders in the global arena. Other Americans, not only the losers from globalization but also those whose self-identification centers upon the American nation, prefer to restrict the free movement of goods, capital, and labor in order to protect the American economy (or more precisely, the interests—not only economic but also social, cultural, and security—of Americans within the territory of the United States itself).

Some political analysts have applied the term liberal (or among some social scientists, neo-liberal) to the first tendency and conservative to the second. But this usage is haunted by the legacy, discussed above, of applying the term conservative to free enterprise, although now that enterprise has become global, and applying the term liberal to government regulation, but now that regulation includes protection imposed by government barriers. Consequently, other political analysts have been more comfortable applying the term “globalist” to the first tendency and “populist” to the second. Globalization and the new divisions that it has brought have therefore added even more confusion to, and erosion of, the terms liberal and conservative.

Nevertheless, what is true of all kinds of conservatives is that they are trying to preserve, to conserve, an existing and established state of affairs, be it involving the social, the security, or the economic realm. And what is true of all kinds of liberals is that they are trying to change this state of affairs, normally but not always in favor of more freedom for the individual (the exception being some kinds of regulation of the economy). The confusion arises from the fact that, as Tocqueville observed as long ago as the 1830s, in America what has always been the existing and established economic state of affairs has been free enterprise or the freedom of the individual. And, as Marx observed as long ago as the 1840s, it is the nature of this economic freedom, of capitalism, to undermine and eventually destroy the existing and established state of affairs in every other realm, including the social and security ones. Thus, in America, conservatism means conserving a liberal dynamic that is constantly in conflict with conservatism. American conservatism thus is simultaneously both conservative and

liberal. It always has been, it is now, and it always will be. Perhaps the best thing for American conservatives is to get used to it and to seek the best balance of the two for their particular time and place. ■

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**Michael Lind** The meanings of the terms “conservative” and “liberal” (and its synonym “progressive”) have been altered by two long-term trends in American politics. The first is the replacement of ideology by partisanship; the second is the alignment of partisanship and identity.

In living memory conservatism and liberalism referred to ideological movements, not political parties. The conservative movement was not identical with the Republican Party, nor was the liberal movement identical with the Democratic Party. This is no longer the case. Today conservative means partisan Republican and liberal means partisan Democrat. Ideological liberals who deviate from the Democratic party line of a given moment are ignored or vilified, as are ideological conservatives who deviate from the Republican party line.

Without ideological movements, there is no place for ideologies. Most of those who pass for prominent conservative and liberal intellectuals today are actually engaged in public relations. It is the job of these apparatchiks to sell a party line to the public, after the party line has already been determined in private by negotiations among donors, special-interest spokesmen, pollsters, and politicians.

The replacement of ideology by partisanship has been accompanied by the alignment of partisanship and ethnicity. The major divide between American politics is not geographic. Maps of how counties vote show that there are no red states and blue states, only red states and blue cities. But the city-suburb divide itself is merely a surrogate for an ethnic and religious divide.

Today the Republican Party is the party of the ethnic and religious majority, white Christians, and the Democratic Party is the party of ethnic and religious minorities—non-whites (blacks and Latinos) and non-Christians (Jews and post-Christian secularists). The fact that the Republicans get some non-white and Jewish and secularist votes, while the Democrats get a minority of white Christian votes, does not alter this pattern. The big cities are Democratic because that is where blacks, Latinos, Jews, and post-Christian secularists are concentrated, and the suburbs and small towns are Republican because that is where most white Christians live.

The emergence of a pan-white, pan-Christian majority party, the Republicans, shows that the melting pot worked for whites. The ethnic divisions among Anglo-Americans and European-Americans have been effaced by assimilation and intermarriage. The once deep theological divide between Protestants and Catholics in the U.S. has been replaced by an alliance of conservative Christians against moral liberalism in both its secular and religious varieties.

By contrast, the core of the Democratic Party is a coalition of ethnic and religious minorities that have little in common other than suspicion of the white Christian majority. Blacks fear white racism; Latinos fear Anglo nativism; and Jews and post-Christian secularists fear Christian triumphalism. A traditional big-city patronage machine, the Democratic Party offers each minority what it wants: affirmative action (blacks and Latinos), mass immigration from Latin America (Latinos), and strict separation of church and state and moral liberalism (Jews and secularists).

The party of the majority and the party of minorities naturally look at government in different ways. Because it represents the white Christian majority, the Republican Party of today is nationalist, identifying the majority with the state; communitarian, thinking that the values of the majority should be enforced by the state; and majoritarian, trusting in elected representatives. As a coalition of minorities, the Democratic Party, with equal consistency, is anti-nationalist, insisting on the difference between the majority and the state; multicultural, rejecting the idea that majority values should be enforced by the state; and anti-majoritarian, trusting in unelected judges to protect ethnic minorities and maverick individuals against the national majority.

**“Libertarians and populists who argue that they are the true conservatives are wasting their breath.”**

Identity politics lives and dies by demography. Democrats hope that mass immigration from Latin America will permit a growing Latino population, allied with the urban minority coalition, to dominate the government. The Republican Party, as the nation-state party, cannot incorporate Latinos as a distinct voting bloc with distinct group privileges the way that the group-based Democratic ethnic machine hopes to do. The white Christian majority, however, might absorb most second- and third-generation Latinos into a mixed-race Christian majority, a task that would be easier if fewer Latinos were foreign-born.

And what of ideologues in this ethnically-based political system? There will still be libertarians, social democrats, greens, populists, and others. If they have any strategic

sense, they will not try to take over one of the two parties. Instead, they will organize themselves as non-partisan movements that seek to influence both of our identity-based national parties.

These ideological movements should call themselves by their proper names. Libertarians and populists who argue that they are the true conservatives are wasting their breath. So are social democrats and greens who argue that they are the true liberals or progressives. For the foreseeable future, the term conservative will be a synonym for Republican and liberal or progressive will be a synonym for Democrat. As labels for genuine public philosophies, those terms are gone for good. Good riddance. ■

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**John Lukacs** Have the adjectives—and nouns — “liberal” and “conservative” become meaningless? Not quite. But almost. Inflation first weakened, then liquefied much of their meaning.

Liberal became a political adjective only in the early 19th century. Before that (see, for example, Jane Austen) it was commendatory, meaning “generous,” “broad-minded,” etc. Soon after that, broad-minded people began to appear whose minds were so broad as to be flat. But that was only one kind of devolution. More important: the originally liberal advocacy of freedom, of limited government, lost much of its meaning as liberals began to champion governmental support of this or that, eventually accepting the provider state. Worse was to come. That was (and still is) the liberals’ unquestioning and thoughtless belief in Progress, often at the expense of religion. Thus, among other things, they have advocated the extension of all kinds of liberties well beyond reason.

Hence the paradoxical situation. Liberalism has won. Abolition of slavery, universal suffrage, female and other emancipations, free speech, and the end of censorship were accomplished; they have become worldwide. But that is, too, why liberalism has become boring. It has little or nothing more worth advocating; indeed, it has almost nothing more to say.

Conservative, too, became a political adjective only in the early 19th century. Its meaning was unpopular, with few exceptions. In the United States, virtually no politician would designate himself a conservative until after about 1950. Thirty years later, more Americans said and thought that they were conservatives than those who said and thought that they were liberals. Presidents were elected as they thought it

advantageous and popular to call themselves conservative. The trouble with that inflation was manifold. Most conservatives disliked liberals more than they liked liberty. Serial marriages, divorces, consumers of pornography, barbaric households with mannerless children were as frequent among conservatives as they were among liberals. Worse: conservatives came to believe in Progress even more than liberals; their inclinations to conserve shrank to near nothing.

But let us face it: the *isms* are becoming *wasms*. Conservatives should be better off than liberals because while liberalism is an *ism*, conservatism is something of an oxymoron, since a conservative ought to be opposed to any kind of ideology. Meanwhile, Original Sin—a conservative, not a liberal, recognition—continues to exist.

The real enemy is now the (outdated) idea of Progress, together with the (thoughtless) belief in Technology. Conservatives should be the first to recognize that. If they don't, their demise will be worse than that of the liberals who, after all, had won—though only on one level and too late. A conservative who fails to protect and to conserve is nothing but a radical loudmouth of a bad sort. ■

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## Heather Mac Donald

Upon leaving office in November 2004,

Attorney General John Ashcroft thanked his staff for keeping the country safe since 9/11. But the real credit, he added, belonged to God. Ultimately, it was God's solicitude for America that had prevented another attack on the homeland.

Many conservatives hear such statements with a soothing sense of approbation. But others—count me among them—feel bewilderment, among much else. If God deserves thanks for fending off assaults on the United States after 9/11, why is he not also responsible for allowing the 2001 hijackings to happen in the first place?

Skeptical conservatives—one of the Right's less celebrated subcultures—are conservatives because of their skepticism, not in spite of it. They ground their ideas in rational thinking and (nonreligious) moral argument. And the conservative movement is crippling itself by leaning too heavily on religion to the exclusion of these temperamentally compatible allies.

Conservative atheists and agnostics support traditional American values. They believe in personal responsibility, self-reliance, and deferred gratification as the bedrock virtues of a prosperous society. They view marriage between a man and a woman as the surest way to raise stable, law-abiding children. They deplore the encroachments of the welfare state on matters best left to private effort.

They also find themselves mystified by the religiosity of the rhetoric that seems to define so much of conservatism today. Our Republican president says that he bases "a lot of [his] foreign policy decisions" on his belief in "the Almighty" and in the Almighty's "great gifts" to mankind. What is one to make of such a statement? According to believers, the Almighty's actions are only intermittently scrutable; using them as a guide for policy, then, would seem reckless. True, when a potential tragedy is averted, believers decipher God's beneficent intervention with ease. The father of Elizabeth Smart, the Salt Lake City girl abducted from her home in 2002, thanked God for answering the public's prayers for her safe return. When nine miners were pulled unharmed from a collapsed Pennsylvania mineshaft in 2002, a representative placard read: "Thank you God, 9 for 9." God's mercy was supposedly manifest when children were saved from the 2005 Indonesian tsunami.

But why did the prayers for five-year-old Samantha Runion go unheeded when she was taken from her Southern California home in 2002 and later sexually assaulted and asphyxiated? If you ask a believer, you will be told that the human mind cannot fathom God's ways. It would seem as if God benefits from double standards of a kind that would make even affirmative action look just. When 12 miners were killed in a West Virginia mine explosion in January 2006, no one posted a sign saying: "For God's sake, please explain: Why 1 for 13?" Innocent children were swept away in the 2005 tsunami, too, but believers blamed natural forces, not God.

The presumption of religious belief—not to mention the contradictory thinking that so often accompanies it—does damage to conservatism by resting its claims on revealed truth. But on such truth there can be no agreement without faith. And a lot of us do not have such faith—nor do we need it to be conservative.

Nonbelievers look elsewhere for a sense of order, valuing the rule of law for its transparency to all rational minds and debating Supreme Court decisions without reverting to mystical precepts or "natural law." It is perfectly possible to revere the Founding Fathers and their monumental accomplishment without celebrating, say, "Washington's God." Skeptical conservatives even believe themselves to be good citizens, a possibility denied by Richard John Neuhaus in a 1991 article.

I have heard it said in the last six years that what makes conservatives superior to liberals is their religious faith—as if morality is impossible without religion and everything is indeed permitted, as the cliché has it. I wonder whether religious conservatives can spot the atheists among them by their deeds or, for that matter, by their political positions. I very much doubt it. Skeptical conservatives do not look into the abyss when they make ethical choices. Their moral



sense is as secure as a believer's. They do not need God or the Christian Bible to discover the golden rule and see themselves in others.

It is often said, in defense of religion, that we all live parasitically off of its moral legacy, that we can only dismiss religion because we are protected by the work it has already done on our behalf. This claim has been debated *ad nauseam* since at least the middle of the 19th century. Suffice it to say that, to many of us, Western society has become more compassionate, humane, and respectful of rights as it has become more secular. Just compare the treatment of prisoners in the 14th century to today, an advance due to Enlightenment reformers. A secularist could as easily chide today's religious conservatives for wrongly ignoring the heritage of the Enlightenment.

A secular value system is of course no guarantee against injustice and brutality, but then neither is Christianity. America's antebellum plantation owners found solid support for slaveholding in their cherished Bible, to name just one group of devout Christians who have brought suffering to the world.

So maybe religious conservatives should stop assuming that they alone occupy the field. Maybe they should cut back a bit on their religious triumphalism. Nonbelievers are good conservatives, too. As Michael Cromartie of the Ethics and Public Policy Center has advised, it should be possible for conservatives to unite on policy without agreeing on theology. ■

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**Scott McConnell** Liberal and conservative, Left and Right are usually meaningful divisions, except in periods of flux, when they become mixed and jumbled until they are reformulated into a new constellation. When we began this magazine four years ago, we felt strongly that "conservative" was a label worth fighting for, and that the neoconservatives, for all their think tanks and journals, should not speak exclusively for the movement. That particular battle doesn't seem so pressing anymore. To this day, if one were to list eight or ten issues that typically distinguish an American conservative from a liberal, *TAC* would align with *National Review* and *The Weekly Standard* on three-fourths of them. But it hardly matters. Few *TAC* readers or contributors feel much solidarity with those publications, or, to put it mildly, they with us. Political taxonomies break down in the face of one transcendent issue—and that is what has occurred over the past four years.

It is hardly unusual for one issue to define, or redefine, matters. American politics were largely organized for 40 years on where one stood on the Cold War. For a decade before that, much of American intellectual conflict turned on one's view of Stalinism. And there were always figures who straddled the typical Left/Right divide: Sen. J. William Fulbright, for instance, opposed federal intervention in support of racial integration but is known to history as a leading "liberal" opponent of the Vietnam War and interventionist foreign policy. In retrospect, there probably was a common thread tying together the two stands—a skepticism about how much Washington know-how could remake a circumstance with deep and complicated roots. But that isn't the point.

**“Political taxonomies break down in the face of one transcendent issue—and that is what has occurred over the past four years.”**

The defining issue of our day is the Iraq War and American foreign policy. It has been so since the shocking attack of 9/11, an event that showed that the survival of the United States as a free society was unexpectedly at risk. Foreign policy, when the stakes are war, peace, and national survival, inevitably becomes the deciding issue when it moves to center stage. The division in this case was whether the United States would seek to isolate al-Qaeda from the Arab world in order to marginalize and destroy it. Or would it pursue policies that inevitably pushed more and more of the world's one billion Muslims towards al-Qaeda's view of America and the world? Astonishingly and recklessly, George W. Bush, influenced by neoconservative advisers who believe the only thing Arabs understand is force, chose the latter course. Under false pretenses, he invaded a country that had absolutely nothing to do with 9/11, while abandoning America's long-time effort to serve as an honest broker in the Israel-Palestine conflict. These policies and their consequences now dominate our age, pushing all the elements of the Left/Right division into the background.

I am, of course, aware that most Americans don't share this view. Apart from the military and their families and the perhaps several million people who follow foreign policy matters seriously, the war has hardly touched the country. But for those who think foreign policy is the issue of our time, it trumps everything, and not only for antiwar conservatives. On the other side, pro-war Trotskyite Christopher Hitchens has become a darling of the neoconservatives, revered in right-wing magazines and websites, and surely read avidly in the White House.

For someone like myself, this situation makes all the issues where one might disagree with liberals—gay marriage, affirmative action, abortion, tax levels—less of a big deal. Even immigration, a major difference between neoconservatives and the traditionalist Right, has receded in significance. When the United States has embarked on a course that may blacken its name for a generation, one must acknowledge that illegal aliens and their supporters had absolutely nothing to do with it.

When one sits down with a liberal, the aforementioned issues become something that can be discussed without rancor or passion, or simply ignored. Next to the war, they hardly seem more important (though surely they are) than whether the Yankees return to their rightful place in the World Series. On the Right, one has good conversations with those who are either antiwar or good friends of long standing. But it has become hard to imagine striking up a new friendship with a pro-Bush “let’s invade the world to make it democratic” type.

Surely the Iraq War will end one way or another, and there will be a meaningful Left and Right again, or at least one meaningful to me. But that’s likely a few years away. ■

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**Kevin Phillips** The terms “liberal” and “conservative” were not very useful three decades ago, and that’s even truer today. But they hang on because of familiarity and elements of tribal memory.

What surprised me, in looking back over the last 30 years, is how many of my books have pursued, at least in part, just what it was about U.S. politics that was changing and what new factors were being added.

*Mediocracy: American Parties and Politics in the Communications Age*, published in 1974, discussed the emergence of a “knowledge industry” elite often hostile to the views of conservative economic elites. *Post-Conservative America*, published in 1982, shortly after Reagan’s election, looked at how much of the new “conservatism”—the California tax revolt, the Religious Right, supply-side economics, and the Sagebrush Rebellion out West—smacked more of populism or radicalism than traditional conservatism.

My 1990 book, *The Politics of Rich and Poor*, pursued that new economic tension. Then in 1994, *Arrogant Capital: Washington, Wall Street, and the Frustration of American Politics*, revisiting my old thesis from *The Emerging Republican Majority* in 1969 that U.S. presidential election cycles pivoted on regional and generational revolts against dominant national elites, contended that the entrenchment of interest-group politics in Washington and financial power in New York had become too great to allow the sort of major realignments seen in earlier days.

*Wealth and Democracy* in 2002 took a further look at that conflict and then tried to put it in an international and historical context. Like Britain, Holland, and other prior leading world economic powers as they topped out, the United States was moving away from an economics of making things, extracting things, and hauling things in favor of a commitment to finance and financial services. This caused ordinary Americans to fall behind while the elites found themselves in clover. Historically, this was a bad sign because financialization, debt, and global overreach usually lead into decline—and raised precisely that threat for the early 21st century U.S.

My 2004 book, *American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune, and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush*, concentrated on yet another danger signal—the calcification of U.S. politics symbolized by the emergence of a Bush dynasty in the Republican Party and the presidency. Indeed, the problem of hereditary factions, funding cliques, and loyalties was bipartisan—the nation’s most prominent Democratic White House hopeful was New York Sen. Hillary Clinton, the wife of the preceding Democratic president.

This year’s book, *American Theocracy: The Perils and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money*, sought to put these three dimensions into a global and historical pattern. Intense, evangelical, and Armageddon-threaded religion was a historical weakness for leading powers from Rome to Spain down to the moralizing imperium of early 20th-century Britain. Massive debt and energy upheaval touch other troubling precedents. The increasing militancy of religion in the GOP coalition was a major caution, but the president’s own tendencies to messianic self-imagery—that he was carrying out God’s plan and that God spoke to him—invoked the most troubling definition of theocracy: a policy in which the rulers purport to speak for God. Obviously, this sort of debate has little to do with liberalism or conservatism.

Neither does the question of obsolescent U.S. political institutions, entrenched interest groups, and the possibility that the nation has entered a trajectory of decline. It’s an understatement to say that conservative and liberal elites tend to deplore and reject this thesis. It drives them both bonkers. Conservative columnist David Brooks parroted a White House hit sheet attacking me for supposed paranoia and conspiracy theory. Meanwhile, *Slate* editor Jacob Weisberg, a liberal part-time drum-beater for ex-Clinton Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, said I was wrong about everything and Democrats shouldn’t listen to me. Rubin, now chairman of the executive committee of New York’s giant Citigroup, was just announcing his new Hamilton Project to sharpen the economics of the Democrats, once the party of Jefferson and Jackson. He, too, must think that the old liberal and conservative divisions don’t matter any more.

Populists and elitists are the new categories that have replaced liberals and conservatives, says David Brooks, and he put me in the populist camp. About the same time, *The New Republic* ran a lengthy analysis saying that the tenor of *American Theocracy*, with its attacks on Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and such proved that I was no longer a populist but had become a Porsche and Pucci elitist. Apparently even the elitists need new dictionaries.

There is, to be sure, some utility in seeing a division between supporters of the more or less triumphant Washington status quo and those doubters, erstwhile liberals and conservatives alike, who increasingly disdain a failed bipartisan national leadership and its policy handiwork. But this is not a broad enough definition either—and perhaps there really isn't one. ■

**KEVIN PHILLIPS'S** most recent book is *American Theocracy: The Perils and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money*, published in March by Viking Penguin.

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**James P. Pinkerton** The late Stephen Jay Gould quipped that the intellectual world could be divided between two camps, the “lumpers” and the “splitters.” Lumpers see commonalities, splitters see differences. Can things be sorted into a few broad categories, or do they need to be assigned to more specific and nuanced cubbyholes? Gould was mostly concerned with paleontology, but the same lumpers-splitters argument can be applied to politics: should we collapse all the variations of American thought into just two categories, liberal and conservative, or should we insist that, say, libertarian conservatives be held separate and distinct from conservative libertarians?

So long as there are just two political parties of consequence in America, it makes sense to use the familiar “lumping” terminology, which would have us aggregating lots of unlike folk into just two categories. And so liberals become synonymous with Democrats and conservatives, Republicans. Admittedly, there are exceptions, such as the effort of many self-proclaimed conservatives to save the political hide of Democratic Sen. Joe Lieberman, whose lifetime rating from the American Conservative Union is 17 out of a possible 100—wars do make for strange neobedfellows.

However, since the “splitters” make good points, too, we might note some key splits within the lumps:

Although it is true, lumpily speaking, that Republicans are the conservative party and Democrats the liberal party, it is also true that the two parties are split, top against bottom. Elite Republicans tend to be libertarian, as do elite

Democrats. Conversely, Republican regulars tend to be populist and conservative, and the same holds true for Democratic regulars.

Not that many elite Republicans, in other words, are passionately pro-life or pro-flag-burning amendment or anti-gay marriage. Indeed, the levels of cynicism and opportunism on such issues inside the Republican Beltway can only be called Nixonian. The real passions of top Republicans are reserved for such causes as tax cuts, free trade, and maybe a foreign war or two. And if the GOP elites are truly ahead of the curve, they embrace avant-garde ideas for Republicanizing immigrants.

Meanwhile, rank-and-file Republicans are far different. The folks closer to the base really are social conservatives, and yet at the same time they are suspicious, even hostile, toward imports and immigrants. And while grassroots GOPers still mostly support the Iraq War, they support it because it's a war in which our boys—strictly speaking, their boys—are fighting and dying, not because they dream of democratizing Kirkuk. It's their patriotic Jacksonian blood that's been fired up, not their world-historical Krauthammerian vision.

If the Republicans are divided between intellectual libertarians and instinctive traditionalists, so, too, are the Democrats.

Top Democrats believe in higher taxes—even if there's a chance that they, personally, will pay more—as well as national health insurance, more spending for infrastructure, and other Big Governmentisms. But it's the rare elite Democrat who will admit to being a socialist, or even a social democrat; most want to see the economy shift a little to the left, although not so much that the World Trade Organization is jeopardized. But what top Dems really believe in is personal freedom—freedom of reproductive choice, freedom to marry someone of either gender, freedom to print government secrets.

**“It's their patriotic Jacksonian blood that's been fired up, not their world-historical Krauthammerian vision.”**

Meanwhile, in the lower depths of the Democratic Party, lots of lefty—but also illiberal—ideas flourish. There are plenty of unionists who would not only support a Smoot-Hawleyish crackdown on trade but also support even a complete government takeover of their company in order to save their jobs. And the millions of downscale blacks, browns, and seniors who yearn for an unlimited expansion of the welfare state can count on the enthusiastic support of more millions of government employees. Yet at the same time, many of these Democrats, including minorities, are pro-life and

pro-traditional morality. Not a lot of gay-marriage advocates in Flint or Brownsville.

So that's how the two big lumps are subdivided. Mostly libertarian Republicans preside over a populist-conservative base on the Right, while on the Left, mostly libertarian Democrats preside over a motley crew—everyone from Luddite socialist Greens to what Europeans would call “right-wing social democrats,” a teeming mass united by little except, paradoxically, anti-libertarianism.

It should come as no surprise that many Americans feel out of place in this partisan-ideological typology. In recent decades, millions of white collars, especially in the North, have drifted into the Democratic Party, while tens of millions of blue collars have become Republican. Which is to say, the GOP has been the net winner in this shuffle. So no Republican should complain about the terminological status quo—at least not too much. ■

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**Justin Raimondo** In the 1920s, H.L. Mencken was considered a man of the Left due to his opposition to Prohibition and the cultural know-nothingism of what he mockingly called “the booboisie.” By the 1930s, however, he was being derided as a right-wing extremist by the New Dealers on account of his contempt for Franklin Roosevelt and his refusal to jump on the bandwagon for war. The same was true of Albert Jay Nock.

The idea of Left and Right is today being transformed: wars always do this, and the Iraq War (and whatever comes next, perhaps Iran) is no different. I am always astonished by references in the ostensibly “right-wing” media to my alleged “leftism.” For example, one Candace de Russy, writing in *National Review Online*, avers:

The extremist anti-war left is beside itself with rage against [*Wall Street Journal* columnist John] Fund and others who dare to challenge its domination of the academy, and in particular Middle East studies. See, for example, Justin Raimondo's diatribe against Fund, whom he labels ‘Yale's very own Torquemada,’ as well as against what he calls ‘the Fund-amentalist hate campaign’ against the Taliban Man. For good measure Raimondo goes on to attack the entire neo-con movement as a ‘perpetual motion machine of hate’ and David Horowitz as a ‘professional witch-hunter.’

To Candace and her confreres at *NRO*, anyone who opposes the neocon agenda is, by definition, part of “the left.” She probably doesn't know I'm a contributing editor of *The American Conservative* and author of *Reclaiming the American Right: The Lost Legacy of the Conservative Movement*, but her abysmal ignorance is not limited to these easily missed facts: it is exemplified by the knee-jerk response of someone who doesn't care about facts at all and simply registers “for” or “against” on a number of litmus-test issues, of which the politics of the Middle East is perhaps the most important (from the neocon point of view). Are you against the war? Then you're a “leftist.” Do you breathe a word of sympathy for the plight of the Palestinian people? Then you're a terrorist-supporting “leftist”! End of discussion.

One big difference between the neocon “Right” and the Old Right of yore is that, in the former, there is no allowable dissent from the party line—and especially not in the realm of foreign policy. The doctrine of global interventionism is the central dogma in the neoconservative worldview, and anyone who crosses over into even vaguely ambiguous territory—e.g., Francis Fukuyama—is subjected to a withering volley of relentless attacks. There is a Soviet quality to these vituperations, perhaps a vestigial remnant of the neocons' leftist origins: recall that David Frum, the neocons' commissar of political correctness, in penning his long screed in *National Review* against Pat Buchanan, Bob Novak, and other antiwar conservatives and libertarians, including myself, ended his peroration with this:

War is a great clarifier. It forces people to take sides. The paleoconservatives have chosen—and the rest of us must choose too. In a time of danger, they have turned their backs on their country. Now we turn our backs on them.

There is to be no discussion, no debate, no opportunity for paleocon deviationists to make our case to the conservative public: the Frum-cons will close their ears and shield their eyes from the sight of our heresy. These people hold a Truth so pure that it cannot risk contamination—or endure examination.

Yes, war is a great clarifier. As the Bush administration sinks deeper into the Iraqi quagmire and the neocons plot another foray, this time into Iran, the geopolitical, financial, and domestic political consequences of our war-crazed foreign policy are all too apparent and whatever else one may say about them, what one cannot say—with a straight face—is that they are conducive to conservatism in any way, shape, or form. As, one by one, the pillars of our old Republic fall away—or are hacked to pieces—and the bloated grandiosity of an Empire rises above the ruins, real conservatives (and libertarians, such as myself) look on in horror—and are labeled “extreme leftists” for our trouble.



The neoconservative claim to the legacy of the American Right is tenuous, and one could easily imagine these consummate opportunists attaching themselves to yet another unlucky host—say, the Democratic Party—if that is where their eternal quest for power draws them. As for us, we have our own legacy, the tradition of the Old Right, and our sense of history, which the revolutionary Jacobins of neoconservatism reject as a matter of principle. In the end, the season of flux will come to a close, the old polarities will return, and we will all be wiser, having learned the lesson that labels mean nothing and principles are everything. ■

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**Llewellyn H. Rockwell Jr.** The headlines blared the results of an election that 0.0001 percent of Americans paid any attention to while it was going on: “Mexico Conservative Scrapes Election Win.”

Now, the use of conservative here suggests that there is some universal understanding of the term. But what could it be?

When Russian and East European politics turned against market reforms, it was said that the conservatives were coming back. So it is in China when the Communist Party affirms its control—though this case is complicated because apparently the Communists are more pro-market than the democratic reformers. In the U.S., it means something else.

So what is a conservative in Mexico? This country was host to the first communist revolution in world history (1910). Recently, it has undergone some praiseworthy market reforms. Perhaps to be a conservative, then, means to restore the old socialist luster? It’s plausible.

But no: the press was perfectly clear on what the term means in this context. Yes, the winning candidate, Felipe Calderon, favors the business class—which is fine by me. Yes, he seems to like the idea of free trade—which is also great. He is a drug warrior—which is a very bad position but consistent with the U.S. definition of conservative. But mostly, what conservative means in this context is that he is a loyal retainer of the ruling party in the United States. In other words, what the press means by Mexican conservative is more or less the same as the way the term is used in the U.S. It means loyalty to the Republican Party state.

Many conservatives of a certain bent will object that this is not the true meaning of the word, and they will cite Richard Weaver, Frank Meyer, and the Old Right. But the truth is that the use of the word “conservative” to mean what used to be called liberal is a postwar innovation of Russell Kirk’s. It has no roots deeper in American history.

If there are conservatives who believe in true liberty today, they were called liberals in earlier times. And any socialists today who call themselves liberals have simply stolen the term and converted it to mean its opposite.

The reality is that today there are ever fewer conservatives alive who believe in true liberty as the old school believed in it. They have been ideologically compromised beyond repair. They have been so seduced by the Bush administration that they have become champions of an egregious war, ghastly bureaucracies like the Department of Homeland Security, and utterly unprincipled on the question of government growth.

Granted, the corruption of conservatism dates way back—to the Reagan administration, to the Nixon administration, and even to the advent of the Cold War, when conservatives signed on to become cheerleaders of the national security state.

But it’s never been as bad as it is today. They sometimes invoke the names of genuinely radical thinkers such as F.A. Hayek and Ludwig von Mises. But their real heroes are talk-radio blabsters, television entertainers, and sexpot pundit quipsters. They have little intellectual curiosity at all.

In many ways, today’s conservatives are party men and women not unlike those we saw in totalitarian countries, people who spout the line and slay the enemy without a thought as to the principles involved. Yes, they hate the Left. But only because the Left is the “other.”

This is why they fail to see that the Left has been making a lot more sense on policy issues in recent years. It is correct on civil liberties, on issues of war and peace, and on the critical issue of religious liberty. By “correct” I mean that in these areas the Left is saying precisely what the liberals of old used to say: as much as possible, society ought to be left to manage itself without the coercive intervention of the state.

**“In many ways, today’s conservatives are party men and women not unlike those we saw in totalitarian countries.”**

Many of us had profound hopes at the end of the Cold War that the conservative movement in this country would give up its warmongering and attachment to party politics and follow the path of pure principle. For awhile, while Clinton was office, this seemed to be happening. How well I can recall the years from 1992 to 1996, when the Republican Party was against government expansion and Clintonian foreign intervention.

But it was a brief moment. We might say that time revealed the truth. To be a conservative in this country means to hold a deep and implacable attachment to the regime insofar as it is run by the Republican Party. Note that

I'm not saying that this is a corruption of the term "conservative" or a misunderstanding. This is what the word means in reality, and there is nothing that can be done about it.

I think there are intellectual reasons for this. A crude form of Hobbesianism has corrupted every conservative thinker in this country. They sincerely believe that it is not liberty that gave rise to civilization but state-generated law, without which society would crumble. So when push comes to shove, they defend the state, no matter how bloody it becomes.

Do you protest? Have I misstated your own political views? You truly love liberty and hate the state and all its works? Good. Bail out of conservatism. Call yourself a libertarian, a liberal, an anarchist, an independent, a revolutionary, a Jeffersonian radical. Or make up your own name. But please, wake up and smell the massivo espresso: when it comes to mindless party loyalty, conservatism today is as bad as communism ever was. ■

**LLEWELLYN H. ROCKWELL JR.** *is president of the Ludwig von Mises Institute and editor of LewRockwell.com.*

**Claes G. Ryn** Modern American conservatism has been enthralled by politics. It should be obvious to all by now that this has been a debilitating preoccupation. Society's long-term direction is not set mainly by politicians. It is set by those who capture a people's mind and imagination. Conservative politicians and policy wonks have failed to reverse any of the main deleterious social trends of the last half-century not because they have lacked financial resources but because efforts like theirs have limited efficacy in the first place. While they have gobbled up millions and millions of donated dollars, the activities that shape the deeper sensibilities and desires of Americans have continued to be dominated by people trying to dismantle what remains of traditional American and Western civilization.

Fascination with politics pushed into the forefront of the conservative movement individuals of limited philosophical and historical discernment. More and more they came under the influence of the zeitgeist and manipulative donors, which has contributed to sometimes ludicrous terminological confusion. Today "conservative" often means leftist, as in wanting to reshape the world in the image of a single ahistorical model ("democracy"). Many so-called conservatives are better described as Jacobins. Most neo-conservatives are ideologically intense universalistic liberals. Needless to say, what Americans call liberalism has long been difficult to tell apart from European social democracy.

To recover, American conservatism would have to reorder its priorities and most especially put politics in its place. America's crisis is at bottom moral-spiritual and cultural. Though a new alliance of homeless political groups is desirable, a realignment would be unavailing in the long run unless the old obsession with politics were also broken. The issues most needing attention will make the eyes of political junkies glaze over.

Modern American conservatism did not take to heart the insights of its most perceptive minds. Those who came to set the tone in the movement as a whole, William F. Buckley Jr. prominent among them, were political intellectuals. It seemed to them that dealing with the moral-spiritual and cultural foundations of civilization was not the most exciting and pressing need. The political intellectuals drew attention and respect away from efforts whose relevance to politics was not immediately obvious. That advanced philosophy and artistic imagination might over time do more than politics to change society did not even occur to most of them. Other than politics, what most interested them was economics. Some paid lip service to philosophy and to what Russell Kirk, following Edmund Burke and Irving Babbitt, called "the moral imagination," but the humanities seemed worthy of little more than a polite nod.

The problem, simply put, was lack of sophistication—an inability to understand what most deeply shapes the outlook and conduct of human beings. Persons move according to their innermost beliefs, hopes, and fears. These are affected much less by politicians than by philosophers, novelists, religious visionaries, moviemakers, playwrights, composers, painters, and the like, though truly great works of this kind reach most minds and imaginations only in diminished, popular form.

**“Fascination with politics pushed into the forefront of the conservative movement individuals of limited philosophical and historical discernment.”**

Yet the conservative movement did not direct its main efforts toward a revitalization of the mind, imagination, and moral-spiritual life. There it relied on shortcuts. In the area of ethics, for example, it assumed that churches would handle the job. But the churches, too, had been deeply influenced by the general moral, intellectual, and aesthetic trends of society. The god worshiped by many was a figment of a polluted, sentimental imagination. The so-called evangelicals did little to break out of their accustomed intellectual poverty. Roman Catholics formed a core within post-World War II conservatism. Their church had more than superfi-

cially resisted major destructive trends in Western society. But as conservative intellectuals they, too, cut corners. For the most part avoiding an advanced engagement with philosophy and the arts, they were satisfied with upholding “orthodoxy,” which they did with Protestant-like earnestness.

The kind of intellectual, aesthetic, and moral-spiritual renewal that might have transformed the universities, the arts, the media, publishing, entertainment, and the churches never quite came off. Without a major reorientation of American thought and sensibility, conservative politics was bound to fail.

The neoconservatives reinforced the preoccupation with politics and public policy. They claimed that before their coming to the rescue American conservatism had been intellectually feeble, but, in reality, it had exhibited far greater scope and depth prior to their arrival. Mentioning just a few thinkers of the 1950s and ’60s proves the point: Friedrich Hayek, Russell Kirk, John Lukacs, Thomas Molnar, Robert Nisbet, Peter Stanlis, Wilhelm Röpke, Peter Viereck, Eliseo Vivas, Eric Voegelin, and Richard Weaver. Behind several of them stood the perhaps most powerful and prophetic American thinker of the 20th century, the Harvard Professor Irving Babbitt (1865-1933). Instead of fully exploring, developing, and applying the insights of such thinkers, the conservative movement wanted to get down to politics without delay, first by trying to elect Barry Goldwater president. Having a flawed sense of priorities, conservatism would before the end of the 20th century go almost completely off the rails, becoming a captive of party, money, and media celebrities.

To complain about today’s terminological confusion is not to imply that the terms used here have single, settled definitions. Words like “conservative” and “liberal” can be meaningfully defined and be useful, but any definition of this type simplifies complex reality. The more philosophical the study of life, the more inadequate such definitions appear. It is partly for this reason that traditional conservatives have insisted that conservatism is not an ideology. Even the best of principles are transcended by the enduring higher purpose of civilization. The means chosen to advance that purpose must change as historical situations change. For example, a conservative would never say, as would some classical liberals (or libertarians), that the legitimate functions of government are always and everywhere the same.

The word “conservative” was always problematic. It seems to imply that conservatism is all about conserving something already achieved. But conservatism wants to conserve the best of the humane heritage because the latter is an indispensable guide to finding and promoting the good, the true, and the beautiful in the present. The spirit of civilization must forever adapt to new circumstances.

Today highly destructive social trends have themselves become traditions of a sort. Hence the spirit of civilization

will have to assert itself in sometimes radical-looking ways, not least in politics. It must free itself of incapacitating habits. One such habit is the increasingly philistine obsession with politics. ■

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**Kirkpatrick Sale** Only in a flat world do the designations “Right” and “Left” have any meaning, equivalent to East and West, where Stalinists, say, are on the extreme Left and Nazis on the extreme Right. But for those who no longer believe the world is flat, it is best to discard those labels as worthless.

Let’s look at a round world instead. There we find that the pole at the top is occupied by authoritarians, with the Stalinists on the left side of the pole, the Nazis on the right side. Nothing much differentiates them but a few small points of ideology and a good deal of rhetoric—they are similar in the essential forms of dictatorial rule, omnipotent government, and single-party power.

And the pole at the bottom, obviously, is the home of the anti-authoritarians of all stripes. On the left side are the various anarchists, against all government but shading into those favoring autonomous communities, on the right the libertarians, favoring only minimal government and free markets. The differences between them are real but not as ultimately important as the similarities—guiding both camps is a rejection of Big Government, centralized power, corporate control, and state authority.

So that leaves the middle of the round earth, where we find all those quasi-authoritarians of many different kinds. On the western rim are those characteristically labeled “liberals” because they favor government big enough to be liberal about doling out considerable public funds for public causes but not so big as to be illiberal in checking individual rights and civil liberties. On the eastern side are those traditionally labeled “conservatives” because they favor a government big enough only to conserve corporate interests and provide corporate cushions but not so big as to interfere overmuch with taxes or regulations.

In that sense, then, “liberal” and “conservative” do have some meaning: they describe the people around the equator of the round world. At some points they are far apart, but there are very few of them at the extremes, and most of them blend from east to west to occupy the squishy middle—Ecuador, say—acting and governing, whatever their rhetoric, with a little bit of both sides—in fact becoming something

rather like the present-day Republicans and Democrats. That's the reason "liberal" and "conservative" mean so little in modern American politics, because there's so little of the genuine original stuff at work: Republican "conservatives" love government as big as it can get, and they pump up the military budget until it takes effectively half of all our dollars (present and past wars included), they love the Security and Exchange Commission's shenanigans, they even agree to have the government interfere in every public school and college; Democrat "liberals" are quite content to let the Bush government trample individual liberties, tear up *habeas corpus*, and spy on citizens with only the merest squawks, going along with egregious tax cuts and standing by as social programs are gutted. It's not that "liberal" and "conservative" have lost their meaning—it's that the two present parties don't represent either one of the labels. That's why they are now so useless—the labels, I mean, but the parties too.

All this says, of course, that what may be needed in American politics are genuine parties of the equatorial Right and Left—a genuine liberal party and a genuine conservative one, as those words once traditionally were meant, truly west and east. At least they wouldn't be the weak and contradictory Tweedledum and Tweedledee we have now.

But, further, it says that what's really needed in American politics is not an attempt to somehow try to restore those old parties, which may indeed be irrelevant today, but a way to bring true vitality and democracy into the system with a thoroughgoing creation of an anti-authoritarian form of government, along the lines of the Jeffersonian principle of that which governs least governs best. Here the people of the south pole can join together, working out ways at local and regional levels to order their politics and economics as may seem best to them, without much regard for a creaky, inept, corrupt, inefficient, wasteful, expensive, and essentially useless national regime.

**“Peaceful, orderly, popular, democratic, and legal secession would enable a wide variety of governments, amenable to all shades of the anti-authoritarian spectrum, to be established.”**

My way of getting to that point, which might not suit everyone but is increasingly being talked about, is to foster decentralism, including secession, and self-determination throughout North America. I am convinced, believe it or not, that secession—by state where the state is cohesive (the model is Vermont, where the secessionist movement is the Second Vermont Republic), or by region where that makes

more sense (Southern California or Cascadia are the models here)—is the most fruitful objective for our political future. Peaceful, orderly, popular, democratic, and legal secession would enable a wide variety of governments, amenable to all shades of the anti-authoritarian spectrum, to be established within a modern political context. Such a wide variety, as I see it, that if you didn't like the place you were, you could always find a place you liked.

That's when "liberal" and "conservative" become truly irrelevant. ■

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**Phyllis Schlafly** The designations "liberal" and "conservative" are highly useful, even though a binary Left/Right political spectrum cannot describe the full range of ideological opinions. It doesn't describe libertarians, and it doesn't necessarily predict opinions on issues such as privacy rights, but it is nevertheless still applicable and very useful.

Complaining about the one-dimensionality of Right and Left positions is a bit like complaining that we can't compare apples and oranges. No scale of variables can accurately describe the full range of qualities a fruit can have. Yet when you go the supermarket, apples and oranges are measured by a single number, the price, and consumers do indeed compare prices when they shop. Whatever varied preferences they have about fruits are judged by dollars and cents at the checkout counter.

Likewise, when voters enter the voting booth, they must convert their complex ideologies into a simple (often binary) choice. They can vote for only one candidate for each public office. American political history has produced the two-party system. The Constitution requires that the president be elected by a majority of presidential electors, not just a plurality. Third parties do not get any electors if they cannot win any states.

Other countries have political systems that encourage multiple minority parties that may enable voters to define their preferences more specifically, but that doesn't give them better representation in government or give more power to ideologies that don't fit neatly into binary classifications. The governing majority is achieved by coalitions that may be even more multi-dimensional than the two major parties in the United States. In Europe, a prime minister can take power as the result of a backroom deal with an



unpopular fringe party. Americans have a better chance of getting a government closer to their views than foreigners who face a fractured spectrum of choices.

Sixty years ago, writers who today would be considered on the Right tried hard to recapture the word liberal because it had an honorable ancestry denoting a belief in liberty. That was a hopeless cause; the word was completely co-opted by the Left.

Forty years ago, when the two major parties were each a mixed bag, conservatives talked endlessly about the need for party realignment so the parties could be delineated as conservative and liberal. Those were the days when southern politicians were mostly Democrats.

**“Bush ran as a conservative, but he has been steadily trying to remold the conservative movement and the Republican Party into the Bush Party.”**

We achieved the party realignment that conservatives sought, starting when grassroots conservatives defeated the Eastern Establishment at the 1964 Republican National Convention. Barry Goldwater's book *The Conscience of a Conservative* enabled the more courageous among us to start using the label conservative. Then in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan made it politically and socially acceptable to be called a conservative.

Ronald Reagan not only made the word popular, but he was a major factor in defining conservatism for our times. By the end of the two Reagan administrations, conservative had come to mean sticking with unchanging principles based on the Constitution the way it was written, the Judeo-Christian moral code, limited government, victory over Communism, American sovereignty, military superiority, lower taxes, less government regulation, private enterprise, and “morning in America.”

Meanwhile, the liberal label tumbled in popularity after LBJ's Great Society: people lost faith that government can solve our problems. Liberalism's decline was aided by hanging the “acid, amnesty, and abortion” slogan on George McGovern, and Michael Dukakis finally enabled us to turn the word liberal into an epithet of political scorn. It's hard to imagine the 2008 Democratic presidential candidate proudly calling himself a liberal as Democrats did for so many decades.

Today, the terms conservative and liberal represent the two dominant political ideologies in America, and it's easy to figure out which party is identified with which label. Liberal dogma demands support of Big Government, abortion, gay rights, globalism, a reduced national defense, and submission to a web of international commitments.

It is obvious why some are now questioning the future vitality of the ideological labels. While no one has any difficulty identifying Hillary Clinton and Howard Dean as liberals, President George W. Bush has muddled up the meaning of conservative.

Bush ran as a conservative, but he has been steadily (some might say stealthily) trying to remold the conservative movement and the Republican Party into the Bush Party. And the Bush Party stands for so many things alien to conservatism, namely, war as an instrument of foreign policy, nation-building overseas, highly concentrated executive power, federal control of education, big increases in social entitlements, massive increases in legal and illegal immigration, forcing American workers to compete with low-wage foreigners (under deceptive enticements such as free trade and global economy), and subordinating U.S. sovereignty to a North American community with open borders.

Our task is to look beyond Bush and make sure that future candidates don't fly under false colors. The labels conservative and liberal are not only important; they are essential.

The conservative movement must reassert its identity distinct from the Bush Party. This process has started with the revolt against the Supreme Court nomination of Harriet Miers, against the Dubai ports deal, and against the Bush-Kennedy-McCain Senate bill to approve “amnesty light” and the admission of tens of millions of new foreign workers.

We know the Democrats' next presidential nominee will be a liberal because that party is hopelessly in the clutches of the Deaniacs and the feminists. Conservatives must make sure that the voters in 2008 are offered a choice, not an echo. ■

**PHYLLIS SCHLAFLY**, the president of *Eagle Forum*, is the author of 20 books. Her latest book is *The Supremacists: The Tyranny of Judges and How to Stop It*.

**Fred Siegel** The terms “Left” and “Right” were coined in the initial stage of the French Revolution. The seating arrangements in the National Assembly of 1789 placed the proponents of a new, more rational France to the left of the podium. On the right were those who wanted to cling to aristocratic tradition. It was but a brief moment of political and ideological clarity. By the time Napoleon crowned himself king in 1804, the terms had become, as they continue to be today, hopelessly confused. The great Catholic liberal Chateaubriand—a reluctant supporter of the Bourbon monarchy as the lesser threat to liberty—described how “mounting the throne,” Napoleon, “seated the common people beside him; a proletarian king.”

Napoleon III, who sometimes described himself as a socialist, and Otto von Bismark, Germany's "Iron Chancellor" who created the first modern welfare state, institutionalized the confusion. By the time we get to the 20th century, when Benito Mussolini, a revolutionary socialist turned national socialist creator of the Italian welfare state, described Italy as "the proletarian nation" fighting a life and death struggle with the capitalist powers, the confusion has become pernicious.

**"It's the center-right in American intellectual life that has adopted the old left-wing themes of universalism at home and democracy abroad."**

Both communism and fascism—each of which strives to create a "new man"—emerged from the theatrical symbolism and mass politics of the French Revolution. But the terms Left and Right that were applied to them made them seem like polar opposites when in fact they were first cousins. "I realize," said Mussolini, "that though there are no political affinities between us, there are intellectual affinities. Like them, we believe in the necessity for a centralized and unitary state, imposing an iron discipline on everyone, but with the difference that they reach this conclusion through the idea of class, we through the idea of the nation."

Applying the terms Left and Right to Mussolini's successors, such as Nasser, Arafat, and Saddam Hussein with their melding of Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islamism, fascism and communism, makes no sense. The French notions of Left and Right had even less meaning when applied to the United States, where we had no feudal past and liberalism, broadly understood, was the political language of the land.

There is scant continuity in what we Americans, in our own peculiar way, describe as Left and Right. We've repeatedly gone through refractory periods like the run-up to the Civil War, the early years of the New Deal, and the 1960s when allegiances shifted along with policy predilections. In the 1920s, partly driven by the Prohibition issue, Democrats were the localist party and Republicans the centralizers—in the 1930s that was reversed. There have been numerous reversals such as the shift in support for the feminists' Equal Rights Amendment. It went from being a Republican to a Democratic issue as upper middle class women moved from the GOP to their rivals during the 1960s. Similarly, in the 1960s the Democrats went from being the majoritarian party of the middle and lower middle classes to a party of the educated elites and the poor, increasingly devoid of white Catholic working-class support. Likewise the New Leftists of the 1960s and '70s entered politics as critics of Henry

Kissinger's amoral foreign-policy realism. Today they have become the amoral realists they once decried.

The use of the Left/Right distinction doesn't help with intellectual life either. Today's academic Left draws much of its inspiration primarily from the anti-modern irrationalists such as Nietzsche, Spengler, Sorel, and Heidegger who were associated with the rise of fascism. It's today's multicultural leftists who insist, like 19th-century European conservatives, that biology is destiny. At the same time, it's the center-right in American intellectual life that has adopted the old left-wing themes of universalism at home and democracy abroad as its credo.

The growing importance of upper middle class professionals, including professors, as a voting bloc means that the terms Left and Right are likely to become even more confused. Today's Left is located not in the economic aspirations of the working class, which is generally culturally conservative, but in what might be described as the New Class of people who make a living by telling others what to think or do. Hostile to middle America, they don't want the proles interfering with their idea of the good life, which now includes the multicultural right to employ a low-cost Latino service/servant class regardless of the larger impact.

But it's in foreign policy where the meanings of Left and Right are most tangled. What do the categories mean regarding the Arab/Israeli dispute when *The Nation* and Pat Buchanan both serve as apologists for the pathologies of Palestinian politics? Similarly, the *mésalliance* on the other side of this aisle brings together, as incongruous supporters of Israel, President Bush and the Euston Manifesto Leftists.

Clearly the terms Left and Right have little meaning when it comes to the Middle East. Still the terms will continue to be used because they are deeply burrowed into the emotional rhetoric we use to talk about politics. But 217 years after it accidentally imposed itself, a nomenclature devised for the semi-feudal society of late 18th-century France is bound to make a hash of describing American political life. ■

**FRED SIEGEL** is the author of *The Prince of the City: Giuliani, New York and the Genius of American Life* from Encounter Books.

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**Taki Theodoracopulos** In June 1967, I was married to my first wife and living in Paris, playing tennis and polo. When the Six-Day War began, Israel asked for volunteers of any nationality and religion. It took me about one minute to decide. I presented myself to the Israeli consulate and was

sent by bus to a gathering place near Clichy, where I spent an extremely uncomfortable night among young French Jews who occasionally would scream out “Israel Vivra!” Needless to say, we were all sent home the next day, Israel’s blitz attack having destroyed the Egyptian air force on day one, the Syrian army and the Arab Legion on days two and three. Then came the Egyptian army’s turn. After one week it was all over.

The reason I volunteered was that like many of my friends, I was pro-Israel. Two things made me change my mind: Yehudi Menuhin and the sinking of the USS *Liberty* and its immediate cover-up by the LBJ administration.

In London, Menuhin, a Jew, declared that he would go to Palestine and give a concert in aid of the displaced Palestinians. When I met him at a friend’s house, he told me things that were hard to believe: about the terror tactics of the Stern Gang and of Irgun, both initially formed to force the British out but who had turned to killing innocent Arabs in order to gain territory. Coming from a devout Jew and the

**“After the Evil Empire’s downfall, I saw a different America—not one dedicated to defending freedom but an empire out to exploit friends and imaginary foes alike.”**

greatest violinist of his time, the point sank in. I eventually made my way down to Palestine and saw the squalid camps the refugees were living in and heard about Deir Yassin, a village that lived in peace with its Jewish neighbors until the massacre by Irgun. As a result, 600,000 Arabs fled the Palestinian territories the UN had set aside for a Jewish state, ensuring a Jewish majority in the new state.

So someone who was ready to fight for Israel’s survival eventually turned pro-Palestinian, while terrorists like Menachem Begin, a future prime minister, were turned into heroes by the propagandists in Israel and in America.

Labels simply don’t work. The old cliché of today’s terrorist becoming tomorrow’s freedom fighter, however, does.

The same applies to world politics. As a child, I witnessed armed communist gangs rounding up teachers, priests, workers, and so-called capitalist exploiters of the people and murdering them outright in camps surrounding Athens. I was eight years old. I, of course, became an arch right-winger, a Cold Warrior, and stayed one until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Uncle Sam was my hero and guiding light. My father offered our large house near the royal palace to the CIA so that American spooks could listen in on Soviet spooks in the Russian embassy next door.

But after the Evil Empire’s downfall, I saw a different America—not one dedicated to defending freedom but an empire out to exploit friends and imaginary foes alike. Why,

for example, are we surrounding Russia with NATO bases? Why are we in Iraq? Why are we threatening Iran and Syria? Why are we not restraining Israel? Why is Bush inviting the Saudi head kleptocrat to Texas and holding his hand like a long-lost brother?

What are Right and Left any more? Who is a liberal and who is a conservative? When Madeleine Albright proudly announces that the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children via the sanctions on Iraq were worth it, even God becomes suspect. Which liberal or conservative can explain to me the difference between an Iraqi insurgent’s roadside bomb that kills civilian passersby and a U.S. bombing raid that also causes the deaths of innocent women and children? Both are acts of savagery: in both cases one knows in advance that civilians will most certainly be killed. Bush and Americans in general claim the moral high ground, but both are terribly wrong. War is a barbaric business. Only defensive wars are justified.

When this journal began four years ago, a bum by the name of David Frum accused us of being unpatriotic Americans—this from a man who has never seen war up close and would never send his son or daughter to serve their country. But we were proved right. Iraq is the greatest American foreign-policy failure, bigger than Vietnam, but the neocons have yet to apologize. To the contrary. The Murdoch-owned *Weekly Standard*’s William Kristol, a sofa samurai par excellence, is urging Uncle Sam to stop dithering and to engage in more pre-emptive wars. Kristol calls himself a conservative. Could I possibly call myself the same? Not on your life.

All governments are monopolies of organized force, inherently unjustifiable. And once accepted, they are bound to get out of control sooner or later. No, there is no longer a Right or a Left. Bush’s mammoth expansion of government power and spending makes LBJ look like Robert Taft, the last true conservative—and peace lover, I might add.

Labels are for fools. ■

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**Philip Weiss** These are important and exciting questions. They reflect the fact that we’re in a period of ideological disarray and realignment. I’m not a very ideological person, but I can talk about these issues in personal terms.

I come out of the Democratic Left. I was a solid Dem till the Clinton era, and then I voted for McCain and Nader because I thought the Democratic Party faithful were downplaying issues I cared about: executive accountability, threats to women. My separation also played out in tribal terms. I grew up in the Jewish Left and thought of myself as an outsider to the power structure. But my tribe came into the establishment in the ’90s, and the Jewish Left was affected by the process.

The Iraq War only drove a bigger wedge into my old affiliations. I was distressed to see the Democratic Party lie down for the war, for a number of reasons. Partly because of the interventionist attitudes that came out of the Balkans experience. And partly out of pro-Israel considerations.

And of course, a lot of them have stuck with the war, right on down the line, alongside the Republicans.

The realignment I would like to see has everything to do with the war. The war has alienated me from our leaders and created a tremendous crisis for our country. It has caused us to despise world opinion, damaged our economy, and done hellish things to Iraq and the Middle East. The responsibility for that war lies on both wings: the nationalistic and neocon Right is chiefly responsible, but the neo-interventionist Left has played its part.

**“My populist values tell me that when an elite segment of a society plans a utopian war without having to put their own kids in harm’s way, there’s a moral hazard.”**

The values that have separated me from the War Party are ones I associate with my ’70s and ’80s Democratic political education in populism and multiculturalism. My populist values tell me that when an elite segment of a society plans a utopian war without having to put their own kids in harm’s way, there’s a moral hazard. This war was planned without any degree of public consensus. We still don’t know all the reasons for it: it’s just the good old-fashioned smoke-filled room.

As for multiculturalism, I learned in my 30s to try to respect the other and try to understand him and demonstrate tolerance for different ways of life. The demonization of Arabs and their societies and the justification of collective punishment for suicide bombers—I find these attitudes appalling. I know a lot of these attitudes flow out of Israel’s experience with Arabs, but I don’t see that this should be our experience, too. The distance between me and many of my former Democratic liberal contingent is demonstrated by a Thomas Friedman comment on *Slate* that the suicide bombers in Tel Aviv pizza parlors had convinced him it was necessary to burst the terrorist mindset by stomping Baghdad. I have never seen such an intimate connection between American interests and Israel’s. “I feel the [American] left is also claimed by the Israel lobby,” Mary-Kay Wilmers, editor of the *London Review of Books*, said to me earlier this year, after she had published the landmark paper on the Israel lobby by Mearsheimer and Walt.

I marched against this war. I’m grateful for the company I’ve now gotten from American conservatives, and I see my own views as coming out of an estimable American tradition: tolerance, *laissez-faire*, don’t-tread-on-me values. There seems to be a lot of cross-pollination at work. Strands of isolationism and realism and fiscal conservatism have influenced me, while I sense that the Left has been able to persuade the Right on the importance of global warming and even affirmative action.

Those conservatives have other ideological baggage I don’t particularly care for. I think of myself as pro-Hispanic on immigration issues, and I’m pro-abortion. I can well imagine having clashes with my new friends over these issues some day. Not now. The country’s in crisis. Inasmuch as we can make any headway together, I don’t think we would allow these issues to jam the spokes. And by the way, when it comes to abortion, I’m distressed that so many Democrats seem to have whittled all their most urgent concerns down to that one issue. I don’t think it’s that important.

I’d say again, the country is in crisis, and my best hope is to see a coalition of engaged and idealistic people, people who believe in the specialness of the American example and who want to bring back the tradition of tolerance.

As a political actor, a coalition like that would be a kind of radical center. As an old left-winger, and an optimist, I would like to see these attitudes come alive in a popular and idealistic groundswell *a la* the late ’60s. Maybe they will gather around Democratic congressmen newly elected later this year. Maybe Republican populists, men like Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, will demonstrate their independence and openness to these ideas. It is scary and exciting to think that popular opinion could turn on the elites and complacent politicians that got us into this war. To do so without demagoguing, and without anti-Semitism, will be a tough act, but an essential one. ■

**PHILIP WEISS** is at work on a book about Jewish issues. He writes a blog for the New York Observer, *Mondoweiss*.

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**Chilton Williamson Jr.** Conservatism reflects the belief that man should live—individually and collectively—according to his nature, which is God-given and immutable. Liberalism insists either that there is no such thing as human nature or that it was improperly understood—and therefore incompletely or perversely expressed—before the 17th century. (Sometimes liberals appear to be arguing both of these contradictory propositions at once.) Clearly, no significant contemporary political philosophy, program, or party can be called conservative in the sense described above. (The



exceptions are the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, but they are infinitely more than the sum of these things.) Just as clearly, every contemporary philosophy, program, or party is, according to my twin definitions, liberal, including the “conservative” ones. Hence it seems that conservative and conservatism are no longer relevant terms (though as relative ones they retain a certain usefulness), while liberal and liberalism remain as accurate as they ever were.

It is untrue that America lacks a truly conservative tradition, attenuated as it may have been. (It is now almost extinct.) Nevertheless, the history of the United States is conclusive evidence that republican government is at odds with conservatism and finally destructive of it. (I take this to be the point of Gordon S. Wood’s *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* and of his just-published book, *Revolutionary Characters*.) There can be no conservatism outside of a hierarchical society, just as civilization is ultimately insupportable absent the structure, guidance, and authority that an aristocratical system, itself controlled by the institution of monarchy, provides. A half-century ago, Willmoore Kendall included monarchism as one of those political alternatives forever mooted by the Founding Fathers and the U.S. Constitution, and he may well have been right about that. (Who, really, can say? The future is always full of surprises, a few of them nice ones.) But that is hardly the point. The issue is not whether America could ever be returned to the social and political institutions of the mother country but whether conservatism as such exists, or can exist, in the United States today. I say it does not and cannot.

Because in the contemporary Western world liberal and conservative denote points on a graduated spectrum rather than distinct and separate opposites, the polarities of Left and Right—dating, as everyone knows, from revolutionary France—are far more accurate terms for the designation of political distinctions. Since Left and liberal are always and everywhere synonymous, improvement lies in the replacement of conservative by rightist, a clear-cut, hard-edged, hard-sounding, and uncompromising word that refuses to mince meanings and brings to mind such unpleasant-seeming writers as Joseph de Maistre (described by a 19th-century French historian as “a fierce absolutist, a furious theocrat, an intransigent legitimist, apostle of a monstrous trinity composed of Pope, King, and Hangman, always and everywhere the champion of the hardest, narrowest and most inflexible dogmatism, a dark figure out of the Middle Ages, part inquisitor, part executioner”). The drawback is that America, with its Protestant and republican history, unlike Europe, lacks a rightist tradition that is the true equivalent of the conservative one. Thus, while the adjective’s meaning is crystalline, in the United States it lacks a proximate object to specify and is therefore as good as irrelevant.

The assumption behind the present exchange of opinions is that the word “liberal” has become as nebulous, confusing, and misleading as “conservative” now is, yet this seems to me a misapprehension. To the extent that “conservatism” is meaningless, that is because the word has been dishonestly used by modern conservatives with the conscious intent to deceive. Not so with liberalism, since liberals never attempt to pass themselves or their ideologically pure ideas off as conservative (except when they are running for something and want the conservative vote under false pretenses), since to do so would be to abdicate their intellectual and moral status as infinitely compassionate demigods and philosopher-kings. Still, many observers claim to have noted a degree of convergence between liberal and conservative in recent decades—precisely the reason why the validity and utility of liberal vs. conservative are currently subject to scrutiny and reconsideration.

**“To the extent that ‘conservatism’ is meaningless, that is because the word has been dishonestly used by modern conservatives with the conscious intent to deceive.”**

In fact, there is a simple test available for both the liberal components of a given political or social program and its fundamental purpose or intent that yields far clearer and less muddled results when applied to liberal schemes, plans, and proposals than to conservative ones. This is the ontological consideration. An example is environmentalism, a movement that in the United States was initiated by conservative Republicans and today is dominated by liberal Democrats, with the aid and support of its original conservative cohorts. What, after all, could be more conservative than conservationism, or even preservationism? Thus environmentalism appears to be a bipartisan business, supported by liberals and conservatives alike: an example of that confusing convergence that is supposed to make liberalism and conservatism indistinguishable, or nearly so.

But when we compare the ontological bases for liberal and conservative support of environmentalist activities, we discover that liberals proceed from neopaganist assumptions, conservatives from classical and Christian traditionalist ones. The philosophical difference between them is not far to seek: it is evident in nearly everything environmentalists of one kind or the other say or do. Not only do they differ in philosophy, moreover, they do so in motive as well. And the same goes for other issues on which liberal-conservative convergence, or what Martin

Luther King scholars call voice-merging, allegedly occurs: foreign interventionism (in the Middle East and in Africa, for instance), the application of free-market economics to Great Society programs, and so forth. It is what neoconservatism is all about.

Liberalism marches forward on a course straight as a plumb line. It is conservatism that, advancing without compass and without courage, veers, staggers, and drifts to intercept the liberal column, with which it all so easily falls in step. ■

**CHILTON WILLIAMSON JR.** *is editor for books at Chronicles and author of The Conservative Bookshelf.*

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**Clyde N. Wilson** The terms “liberal” and “conservative” were usable signs in a society in which the state was governed by politics. They are of little use in the 21st-century United States because “politics” no longer plays any significant role in governance.

In a dynamic and free republican society, citizens of similar ideas, values, and interests, and even inherited allegiances and inclinations, come together to seek representation, forming political parties as their vehicle in the contest with citizens of opposing tendencies. (In addition, in the United States, political representation has been geographically based rather than strictly a matter of parties.) Citizenship—participation in politics—assumes mental and material independence and a social identity pre-existing the state apparatus. None of these preconditions for politics any longer characterize the American regime.

Today congressmen do not represent their constituents but represent the state in its distribution of favors to their constituencies, and their tenure rests upon their success at this function. The relationship of president and Congress now resembles that of a Roman emperor and senate. And as in that historical case, a large part of the population is proletarianized, lacking the qualities for citizenship as it has been understood.

The American regime has reached a state of imperial bureaucratization in which institutions—not only parties, but armed forces, police, churches, media, charities, schools—exist to serve those who control and benefit from them rather than to carry out the social functions for which they were established. In the last two presidential elections not a single substantive issue was raised or contested. The nominating conventions did not debate and decide the positions they were to represent but merely ratified the dictates of the leader. Rather than the party representing the people, the people were sent forth to represent the party. The Republican conventions that nominated George W. Bush did

not even allow a dissenting voice to be heard nor allow any statement that might distinguish their party from the opposition on any substantive matter. There was no politics at all—only marketing.

After the elections, it was seen that the parties, except at the fringes, do not disagree on anything of importance nor do they represent the people on any important issue—for instance, war, foreign aid, immigration, or quotas.

On behalf of the imperial bureaucratic regime, the Democrats absorb and defang whatever liberal inclinations remain in their constituency, and the Republicans do likewise for the conservatives. The only difference is that the Democrats institutionally are wired to keep up the momentum of an already liberal state, while the Republicans’ conservatism has always been a pure fraud.

If, as may be the case, a real politics is struggling to be born, one that involves representation of the interests and values of the remnant genuine elements of American society that have a reality apart from the state, then the terms “liberal” and “conservative” will not much apply. Politics against the imperial regime will have to be both defensive and radical, that is to say, it will have to be reactionary. ■

**CLYDE N. WILSON** *is professor of history at the University of South Carolina and editor of The Papers of John C. Calhoun.*

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**John Zmirak** In one sense, the Left/Right dichotomy is like those chemicals that are so simple that they’re toxic. Why, when discussing the panoramic landscape of theories about how man shall live in community, should we choose a one-dimensional model—which offers no up or down, much less a diagonal? Can you imagine imposing such a primitive scheme on any other field of human life? Picture a Left-to-Right spectrum of painters, poets, or national cuisines. You could draw one up according to arbitrarily chosen qualities—such as realism, rhyme scheme, or wasabi content. It can be done, but why bother?

Our style of talking about politics began with the seating of deputies in the National Assembly during the French Revolution: on the left sat the utopian radicals and atheists, and on the right sat royalist Catholics. They differed on a fairly simple question: behead the king and persecute the Church—or restore the king and burn Robespierre at the stake. Of course, the wrong side won, but at least the stakes were clear. Ever since, the extension of Left/Right to more complex situations has done more harm than good.

This bipolar model casts political philosophy in terms of a two-sided tug-of-war. And we all know where a tug-of-

war usually ends—with both teams down in the muck. Each side invariably is defined by its loudest, most callously consistent advocate. Wiser men of nuanced views, who display what should be the governing virtues in any endeavor—prudence and charity—are meanwhile labeled as “suspect,” “mushy,” or “flip-floppers.” This explains how the most interesting thinkers on the Right, such as Robert Nisbet, Russell Kirk, and Wilhelm Röpke, have come to be marginalized or almost forgotten. Mention them to the Komsomol kids at CPAC some time if you care to surf on a sea of blank looks.

**“If we’re conservatives, there must be something we’re trying to conserve—a golden thread linking us to our shared intellectual and civilizational past.”**

So the very model we use to describe political thinking tends to suppress it. In response, some libertarians have come up with a more complex two-dimensional chart, plotting various thinkers based on when and where they invoked the power of the state to solve economic and social problems. Thus a pro-life libertarian would score as “upper-right” while a pro-choice socialist would land in “lower-left.”

Better, but still pretty vacuous. When you group thinkers according to when they’d employ coercion, you learn something about their means but nothing about the ends they seek. Are they herding us toward a Brave New World? Theocracy? A commune or a prison camp? Inquiring minds want to know.

To speak usefully about politics, we need to address both the how and the why. If we do that, we can indeed create a useful scheme for grouping thinkers. More importantly, we can locate the principles that should motivate conservatives in the U.S. and Europe—and can reconnect today’s pro-lifers and homeschoolers to their intellectual ancestors.

Let’s be radical for a moment and look back to our roots. Was there one governing principle that motivated the opponents of the French Revolution, from Bonald to Burke? And for that matter, subsequent revolutionaries—from Lenin and Hitler to Hugh Hefner and Betty Friedan? Is there a vision of the Good uniting principled conservatives?

If there isn’t, then we are driven by a spastic reaction to various evils as they arise—like the mythic Old Southern Lady who once proclaimed, “I’m against all change, even for the better.” Were this what defined us, we’d find ourselves in bed with the likes of Brezhnev, whom news reporters incessantly called a conservative. For that matter, reading Roman history, we would have to side with Diocletian against the Christians.

There is a positive conservative vision of the Good, but talking about it will prove divisive. It might impair the Popular Front against the spread of Islamofascist Moonbat America-Hating Transnationalism. Christopher Hitchens might storm away from our K Street barstool.

Still, this must be said: what defines conservatism in the West is a vision of the human person grounded in some pretty specific traditions: the Jewish-Christian revelation, explicated and tempered in the light of classical reason, embodied in the historic institutions that arose in medieval Europe. It was the union of these three elements that gave rise to the ordered liberty, innovation, and prosperity that made Christendom (later unchristened “the West”) the most powerful and attractive civilization on earth. This trinity must exist in balance, even tension, but none of these three elements can safely be neglected—lest we fall into theocracy, utilitarianism, or utopianism. (Sadly, the coalition that elected George W. Bush was a pastiche of all three ugly tendencies.) This is the end upon which true conservatives—regardless of their personal faith or skepticism—will agree.

Of course, we will differ about how to preserve, update, and carry on this precious heritage. We must argue over which means best serve this end—to what degree, for instance, state support of religion corrupts the pure stream of faith. We may well conclude that in a society where separation of church and state has been pressed to its radical limit by entrenched irreligious elites, any expansion of the state is by definition a victory for secularism. If so, then people of faith should give up most attempts to employ the state to promote religious goals—and become libertarians. Others might argue that we should fight to restore the status quo around 1930, where classically tolerant American Protestantism dominated in many localities, but large pockets existed where other values thrived—such as large cities with powerful Catholic and Jewish populations. These are arguments we can and should be having. But they are only made possible by a fundamental agreement about our heritage. If we’re conservatives, there must be something we’re trying to conserve—a golden thread linking us to our shared intellectual and civilizational past. If we cut it, we are adrift. ■

**JOHN ZMIRAK** is author of *The Bad Catholic’s Guide to Good Living*.

## End of summer issue

In keeping with our production schedule, *TAC*’s next issue will publish in four weeks instead of the usual two. Have a wonderful summer!

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